

THREE:

Curtains, The Shooting , and Dark Wave

By
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Curtains

Foreword:
In the Gathering Dark
By John Pickman

Listen.

Rain patters on old cobblestones. Music comes from another room, muffled and ghostlike. Black water taps at the wooden hulls of heavy boats. A raven takes wing from the steeple of a church. Children hear the rustle of black wings in their sleep. Mist creeps out of the river, onto the quiet, deserted streets. It makes no sound. No sound at all.

In these streets, in these silences, something may arise.

Somewhere nearby...perhaps one street away...perhaps two...

The purposeful, regular sound of footfalls on the cobbles.

Listen.

The city sleeps. It dreams.

We define ourselves through time. Our lives are based upon it. We accept it as a universal and inscrutable constant of the universe. Neither maleficent nor beneficent...but merely there. Why, then, can time speed up during periods of intense joy, and slow near to a full stop during times of sadness, boredom, or discomfort? We make it seem that way, of course, comes the reply. But wait. Time, as we know it, is merely a product of our need to define change. The tree and the rock do not need time. Neither-at least, probably not-does the badger or the dog. *We* are the ones who need time. We created it.

Why then, does time seem so often to work against us?

This provokes unpleasant questions about human nature, free will, and what sort of deity or deities might lie in the strata of consciousness above ours. Think about it.

Aldous Huxley, one of the most freethinking men of the late nineteenth century, was inspired to write a pamphlet concerning some of the suspicions he had about time. It was entitled:

What is the Fourth Dimension?

Huxley proposed that time was a human illusion, and that all events were inextricably linked. That these events occurred in such a way, forming such lines of fate and coincidence that they were destined to meet somehow, in some way. A convergence.

For instance:

Something strange happens. A century later, a similar event takes place. Then again fifty years later. Then twenty-five. Then twelve-and-a-half.

"An invisible curve, rising through the centuries," wrote Alan Moore. And he was right.

In 1738, a man, dubbed The Monster, was caught attacking women in London. I'll leave you to guess what area it happened in. In 1888, there was the Whitechapel Murders. In 1938, there was the Halifax Slasher. In case you are curious, it was later discovered that all of the victims of the Halifax Slasher had actually *slashed themselves* in a fit of mania. Think about that one for awhile. In 1963, Ian Brady and Myra handle carried out the Moors murders, which instigated almost the exact same kind of panic as the Whitechapel killings of so long ago. Then, twelve-and-a-half years later, Peter Sutcliffe—who became known as the Yorkshire Ripper for his hammer and knife attacks upon prostitutes—claimed to hear a supernatural voice address him by name and instruct him to kill prostitutes. This happened while he was working as a gravedigger.

And so on. Believe me, dear reader, when I tell you that IF you choose to go looking into these killings—and the others described above—you will come away with a distinct feeling that

something odd is going on. There are names, streets, things, and ideas that seem to weirdly match each other as they spiral down through the years...as if they were echoes of something...some primal idea...

Monster.

As children, we learn the word very early on, and it almost always scares us. Then we grow up, and we pretend not to be bothered anymore. But we are. We just hide it well.

A voice, whispering in your ear between one moment and the next. A face, half-seen in the midst of a crowded room...and then...gone. A rustle of spectral wings, a breeze, and something sails out into the hot night...and you forget about it. Except...

When you awake, shivering and alone, it is there. The crowded room, the brightly-lit party...it takes on the aspect of a T.S. Eliot Poem, full of strange and troubling undercurrents.

"In the rooms, the women come and go..."

A voice in an empty parlour.

Monster.

From somewhere across the city, a raven calls. The old, dark dread begins to creep back into our minds. This is nothing we can pinpoint. Nothing we can prove. It is just below the surface, like the echo of footsteps which seem to match our own. We stop...and the echo is gone. And we tell ourselves that it was never there to begin with.

Then comes a thick, syrupy chuckle, full of blood.

The city sleeps. It dreams.

Sometimes it gives birth to nightmares.

The candle is burning low, dear readers, and my time with you is almost done. The shadows have grown long, and the moon has slipped behind the clouds. The wind rustles the dead leaves, and sends them spiraling over the cobblestones. The candle goes out.

Out there...in the watches of the night...something terrible is happening.

Listen.

You can hear it.
--John Pickman,
8/10/03

Prolog

Tom awoke that morning with the emblematic melancholy. He got out of bed, dusted the residue of last-minute dreaming from his conscious mind, and wondered what he was still doing in Muncie. Perhaps he was simply such an entrenched masochist that staying here, even though it represented the least comfortable choice (certainly, as far as his eating habits were concerned) that he felt that he had no other alternative. At least, here, in this little boarding room, he had the freedom and sense of space he would not have been afforded if he had simply gone home, after college, to live with his mother and draw up plans.

However, as she had quickly pointed out, he was going to need a source of income, a way to support a variety of nasty habits, and a shoulder to lean on. He had one out of three at least, but the last job that he had had got away from him, in a manner of speaking. He had been laid-off, then rather unceremoniously canned more than a week later, after having been given the opportunity to stand-in hours at a different location of the same store.

It had all been impenetrable, and a little beyond him.

He hauled himself out of bed, and looked in the mirror.

His eyes had the same haunted, bedraggled look as always, and he felt that first tinge of regret in the morning to be waking up as the same person he had fell asleep as the night before. He began to pull on a shirt, and scratch himself.

He was living in the upstairs of a great old house that dated from the 1880's. *Interesting time period*, he had thought, and *it should do nicely for a place to write the new book I have in mind*.

Book?

Ah yes, you see, Tom held notions of literary greatness within his still-beating heart. Beating, despite the kicking it had taken over the past two years: weight gain, divorce, depression, lack of motivation, alcoholism, and gradual possession by strange forces.

He made his way to the bathroom, which was down a short hall around the corner. There were two other rooms upstairs, one of them occupied by Tom's occasional drinking buddy Chris, and the other by a Jamaican grad student that rarely spoke. Neither had been there for sometime, and the only other person he could count on being in the house with him this morning was the landlady, Roma, who unfortunately lived downstairs.

We emphasize the word unfortunately.

He took his time on the toilet, still chasing fairies with half of his steadily waking brain. Early in the morning, it was hard to convince him that he was actually alive, and not just experiencing some long-range telepathic communication from some astral visitor who was bent on convincing him, for unfathomable reasons, that he was actually Tom Baker, and not a fabulously wealthy international playboy. Damn those astral beings.

He went downstairs then to smoke the first cigarette of the day. Tom, by age of twenty-six, had been smoking half of his life and never, really, intended to quit. It was simply not in the game plan. Breathing was a secondary consideration.

Outside, Riverside Avenue looked like it was yawning in the rather chilly spring dawn. The sky looked overcast, which always delighted Tom, him having the troglodyte's aversion to sunshine, and a predilection for damp weather that put him in the same league with several species of burrowing insect. There was nothing that consternated him more than a ray of bright light and temperatures higher than the mid-sixties.

He quickly slipped back into the gloom, careful to close the front door quietly, lest he rouse Roma from her lair.

Then, more time on the john, trying desperately to void his

bowels of any excess *merde* that had not seen fit to exit with dignity the first time. After much straining and grunting, he simply gave up, willing to forego the effort for now, regroup, and hit the enemy again later when it was lulled into a false sense of security.

He didn't bother to wipe his posteriors, counting on a good hot shower to do it for him. He busily washed himself, making sure to moan inwardly at the pendulous gut and other less-than-savory features of his own body. Oh, why!

He then stood naked and wet in front of the bathroom mirror, ran his toothbrush over his aching teeth, and squeezed a small mountain of shaving cream into the palm of his hand. He stared at it a moment, and then said, "this means...something". He then laughed, inwardly, and proceeded to rid himself of the five 'o'clock shadow that seemed to haunt his face in the best of times.

He went back out into the hall, careful not to glance at the staircase as he walked past the landing (my, he was developing a bloody phobia, or *something*), and went into his room to dress.

His clothing was a patchwork collection of department store and second hand, but he picked out the best things he could find and stared at himself in the mirror from a variety of different angles to make sure that he felt comfortable presenting himself to the world like this. He made sure to use deodorant, and then pulled on his boots and was ready. Then he stopped to consider: just what the hell had he gotten ready *for*?

It was now Tuesday, and his rent was due in less than two weeks. He wasn't going to be able to find a job in that short amount of time, and even if he did, he knew it would be over two weeks before he got his first check. He didn't want to move back to his mother's...but he didn't want to stay in Muncie, either. He got up and ventured out into the morning.

He walked downtown. It was just over the bridge, a mere hop, skip, and jump. Downtown was dusty, and felt sleazy, for some unfathomable reason. It wasn't a glamorous sleazy, either; not a Las Vegas sleazy, but the same sort of sleazy you might

associate with a very dirty, very old restaurant that still tried to pretend it was anything more than a greasy spoon. Downtown was sleazy the way topless bars and bug infested hotel rooms were sleazy.

It was rundown, and dirty, having at its center the Mits Bus terminal and down along main, past the court house and jail, row after row of bail bonds offices and hole-in-the-wall law firms. If you walked down another block you passed what amounted to the cultural center of downtown. The Mezza Luna restaurant was rather more upscale in price than what its actual fare required, but as it was located in perhaps what must have been the oldest building downtown, a great gorgeous Victorian that seemed as monolithic in size as it was in age, the effect was one of a rather quaint, antique elegance.

He made his way past the Mezzo Luna, and walked down the length of the building, looking into dusty panes that had once housed businesses and and shops. He would have favored running into the Mezzo Luna and stealing a sandwich from someone, but he surmised that perhaps outright robbery was not the wisest alternative considering the close proximity of the jailhouse.

One more block, and right across the street you had the Heorot, a great dim bar that qualified as Muncie's most popular. Inside, all was dank, the decor was medieval mead hall, and the patronage seemed to be anywhere from college professors and grad students to blue collar townies. It always smelled strongly of tobacco, spilt beer, and slightly burnt pizza cheese.

He had spent many nights there, drunk, looking for the affection of young women of, how shall we say, *loose* virtue. It had never been forthcoming. And who really cared?

There was one young woman, who happened to live right down town, that he was enamored with. They had seen each other, furtively, for over a year, but it was a difficult courtship. Difficult because, whatever it was that attracted them towards each other seemed to be quite the same thing that often pulled them apart. Their personalities were almost diametrically opposite:

she smiled and he sulked. She loved, and he mostly found fault with the people that seemed only too eager to find fault with him. They both rather felt that they were doomed. He, almost certainly, knew it inside of himself as a fact.

She lived in a weather-beaten white building across the street from the Juvenile Detention Center, where she worked with disadvantaged children. It was part and parcel of her character that she should have graduated college with an English degree to end up in social work. She was always trying to be a blessing to society. It almost made him queasy.

But, he did love her, although they were in one of their lulls where there had been no real contact between them for over a week. He couldn't help but backtrack somewhat to walk past her building.

He knew she would be inside getting ready for work: coming her hair, brushing her teeth, searching through her closet for something decent to wear. She was very particular in that department, unlike himself, who was content to make do with whatever he could find that was reasonably comfortable.

He was tempted to walk down by her place and then thought better of it; it would be too much of a temptation to stop and knock, and she would be thoroughly irritated by the fact that he was interrupting her before her shift began. Instead, he walked further to the end of the block and crossed the street, over to the Village Coffee restaurant, which stood in the same corner store that had formerly been Dame Leos Blues.

What to do with the day? He knew that he should trek back home, freshen up abit, and proceed to try and find some sort of work to sustain him until he could really dig in and find a career path. His college degree had not been the meal ticket he thought that it would be, and, at any rate, he knew that he would eventually be returning to classes to try and earn a master.

He turned and looked back in the direction of the Heorot. Part of a building that used to house the local fetish shop had been torn down for renovation. He remembered the place well.

Several of his homeless friends had sought shelter there, the Mistress being apt to take in strays when she could. It was a strange world, wasn't it?

Hours later, after having beat the pavements hunting up applications, he sat at one of the round picnic tables at his favorite coffee house in the Ball State University village, and smoked a dozen cigarettes. It was an overcast day, the sun having slipped behind cloud covering and the barometer dropping with promise of a light sprinkle. Inside, he could see Professor Hector talking to the pretty sorority sister that worked behind the counter. He knew then, just as certainly as he knew that tomorrow would be as exhausting as today had been, that Hector would approach the table, would ask him very politely if he could "pleez sit down here, Meester Baker, " and that he and the Professor (who taught upper-level English courses) would proceed to have a long and rambling conversation, in which, at several points, Tom would get lost. It had transpired countless times.

"Well, *Senor* Baker, I must say you are looking very good today. Let me tell you that the moon is in Pisces, which is very good for Cancer, no? But not so good for Scorpio or Gemini. But, I tell, you must not fear, because soon, it will be in Saggitarius, which means you must be expecting a creative surge any day now."

Tom laughed. It was just like the professor to begin a conversation with an astrology forecast.

"Professor, I could certainly use one. How have you been lately?" Tom leaned back a bit in his chair and exhaled a curl of cigarette smoke.

The Professor smiled. Tom had to admit, with his white goatee and pecunious dress, he looked faintly like Colonel Sanders. But he was the very picture of dignity, and was quite amusing strolling around, in the sunshine, with a large straw hat and a hand rolled cigarette popped into the corner of his mouth.

"Oh, Mr. Baker, I have been very good. I am reading a wonderful novel by a very talented writer from South Africa.

Here, I show you..."

And he proceeded to open his briefcase and retrieve some dusty book that Tom had absolutely no interest in. But it didn't really matter, because to listen to the Professor's strange narratives were pleasurable enough, in and of themselves.

"You know, Mr. Baker, it reminds me when I lived in Boulder, Col-o-*raaad-o*, back in, was it '67, '68? And, *do you know what*; I had the pleasure of meeting none other than Joan Lamont, who was celebrated beat poet and good friend to the divine Allen Geensburg. Ah, she had such a hang-up on Allen. Then, you know, she married a wealthy man, a politico, in Denver. She became a society lady, but she still wanted to, as they say, *hang out with the swinging crowd, baby!*"

Tom listened intently, knowing that the punch line was just around the corner.

"Well, he said, I think it was in '68 that they had a nude poetry reading at the University of Boulder, and she attended. All night, she is trying to get Allen's attention, but by this time somebody had told him she was married to so-and-so who was a Republican who supported Nixon. And she walked up to him, and do you know what he told her?"

Tom shook his head, but he had a fairly good idea.

"Kill a pig for Jesus!"

He broke out into raspy laughter, and Tom couldn't help but smile inside. The Professor pulled a half pouch of Velvet tobacco from his coat pocket and began to roll a cigarette with one gnarled old hand.

The conversation drifted into a mesmerizing ramble. The Professor was good at beginning a story, and then breaking it off in the middle, to lead to some other topic, some other recollection from years gone back. Although his Honduran diction and accent were often hard to keep up with, Tom would never miss an opportunity to talk with the Professor, who he knew, had seen more of the world than three people his age.

"You know, I have known many up and coming young

writers, before they made it...I have known them. And I think if you keep going, you will eventually achieve success, but maybe only later in life. You are Cancer, but also very much with a kind of Pisces way about you." he stopped to light the butt of his cigarette, which had gone out.

"So, you are very peculiar."

"Yes," Tom had said. "But it's difficult for me to stay focused for very long."

"I can see that," the Professor agreed. "It is part of your Cancer personality."

"I don't know if that's it exactly...I mean, I feel the urge to write, it's just the actual act of completing anything that gives me problems. I have a big problem with motivation."

"Yes, you are very much a Cancer in that you feel the whole weight of the world is upon your shoulders. Like God is out to get you, maybe. But...you are getting better. I don't hear you say the things that you use to."

Tom was suddenly curious.

"Like what?"

"Oh, you know, '*you goddamn mutherfuckers roahr roahr roahr!*' And the Professor began to growl and scowl in a way that Tom thought was dreadfully funny.

After a few moments of silence he put his hands on his hips, and proclaimed, "Well, I must be off. I have papers to grade, and it seems like almost I never am able to get them done on time. But my students, they like Professor Hector."

"I'm sure they do, Professor. I have to admit, out of everyone I have met since I've been in Muncie, you have to be one of the *most* interesting."

"*Gracias, Senor.*"

Tom stood, and thrust out his hand.

"A pleasure, as always."

"Yes, and remember you must be careful around the twenty-second or twenty-third, but after that...should be okay. The moon, it will be in Leo"

Tom sometimes had his doubts about the Professors astrological predictions.

He returned home after nightfall, to a house that was quiet and dark. He occupied a slightly buggy room on the second floor, in a house that had been built in 1880. Well, that was just as well; perfect really, a damn good place to write the novel he was working on.

The house was situated on fraternity row, down the street from campus, and was none too quiet on the weekends. But strangely, it seemed as if when he was upstairs he was actually cut off, in some inexplicable way, from the rest of the world. It still retained that strange feeling of the *past*, and it was often he felt as if he was some kind of interloper, or squatter, and that the house might spit him out the door and into the streets like someone who had accidentally put a bug into their mouth with a spoonful of soup. In the dark, the stairwell seemed cavernous; alien.

As soon as he entered he turned on the stereo. It was the melancholy music of *Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds*. He sometimes told people it was the only music that still held any relevance for him.

As Nick crooned mournfully about a weeping song, he sat down at the keyboard and started his computer. He had not touched his novel in a little over two months, when the creeping self-doubt had begun to torment him again. He pondered if he was even qualified to write it, considering the subject matter. But it had been his friend Pickman that had told him to "finish it. It'll be whatever it is." and so he had made it grow, and it had taken possession of him again. The idea was mostly formed. Now all he needed were *words*.

Part the First:
Beneath the Hood

Another Nightmare

For although nepenthe had calmed me, I know always that I am an outsider; a stranger in this century and among those who are still men. This I have known ever since I stretched out my fingers to the abomination within the great gilded frame; stretched out my fingers and touched *a cold and unyielding surface of polished glass*.

---H.P. Lovecraft ,
"The Outsider"

Joseph Merrick was dreaming.

He was walking through, and away from, Bedstead Square at night. It was raining lightly, and the London fog crept in on children's feet to wind itself around his poor misshapen legs like a snake. The clatter of a passing carriage could be heard in the distance, on the rough cobbled stones of Whitechapel. Those stones still reverberated the wail of infants that had died of cholera, and starvation. There was no telling when this particular nightmare would end.

Why should it? Why should it ever end? One corner leading to a path

where even old freaks could find something more hideous than themselves upon which to gaze.

He was still thinking. Good. He knew this to be a nightmare. He knew that, beneath the gross layers of flesh and the cold stares of the normal men and women who came to look at this abomination of God there must still be in existence some place--in all the great unfathomable mystery of creation--where even more hideous nightmares dwelt. It was unthinkable that there were none in hell more monstrous looking than him.

The faces that marched past his squinted eye-hole bore the common look of revulsion that he had grown use to after so many long years of suffering. Diseased, hate-filled, abominable faces that twitched with disgust; blighted, verminous, nasty. Dirty faces of people who picked out whatever meager living they could for a doss house bed or a crust of bread. Yet still, there was two pence for liquor, and some left over to go and stare at the *freak*.

Walking; still walking, although he could already feel the first stirrings of fear and apprehension inside himself. He could hear Ben chime in the chilly air, and he knew he must be in Whitechapel Road, because there was the green grocer's shop where, once, he had been the sole attraction. It had been the same place where a wax works had stood, and the "Wicked Quarter Mile" was quick to capitalize on the tragedy of slaughtered whores; one of the exhibits had been a replication of the Ripper murders that had so terrorized London two short years past.

I have seen the Ripper! I know exactly what he looks like! If only I could but restore the memory...It had been too much, a shock to the nerves that I wasn't prepared to deal with. And who would have believed it possible?

Somehow, he found himself down a stinking, mucky alley, where a backdoor led into a more squalid home than even he had ever laid eyes upon. Inside, a mother lay in the throes of childbirth, suffering by the agony of her labor pains. The Midwife, who knelt beside the straw mattress and held the woman's hand, could give but scant comfort; the birthing mother seemed to be almost hectic.

The room was small, boiling; there seemed to be something black hanging in the very air. He could not see the corner of the room, but he could tell that a man was hiding; in the making. This presence, seeming to have the soul of a thirsty animal, gave off great notions of terror that he could nearly catch sight of.

I have never seen a woman's sexual parts. The parts that really interest me compel me. Oh, I would like to touch them, feel them...know the soft caress and the sigh of a woman. But all I have ever caused women is severe shock...

He reached out his fragile, little-girl hand; this was the hand that God had fashioned in His image.

Oh, I want to touch her...I want to feel the soft little skull of that normal baby thrust out from between her hairy womaness...I want to feel a normal babies head. I want...I want...

Suddenly, the man hiding in the dark seemed to creep closer to the bed. Now, his long filthy coat could be seen, sweeping the rotted floor boards. His hands were covered in white kid gloves. They seem to hunger to hold a baby too.

No, no...You must get away from here. Oh, God in heaven, murder murder murder...

Suddenly, the filthy gray bed sheet was slick, wet. It seemed almost as if a fountain had been turned on beneath the infested mattress. The Whitechapel whore gave one last great gasp and fell backwards. This was the outcome.

The midwife let her tiny, birdlike hand fall. Joseph had not seen her face, but now, slowly, she rose up from where she had knelt, close to the bed. Her clothing was frayed; her apron and hands were stained with blood and pollution. Merrick felt a pang of terror stab his dreaming heart.

I can see her face. No! Don't look at me! No! I beg of you, have mercy on me in the name of Jesus Christ!

Beneath her jolly bonnet was a white skull, picked as clean as a stone on a desert beach. He began to hear the wailing of steam, and realized it was his own piping scream.

Morning

From the brow there projected a huge bony mass like a loaf, while from the back of the head hung a bag of spongy, fungous-looking skin, the surface of which was comparable to brown cauliflower[...]the osseous growth on the forehead almost occluded one eye. The circumference of the head was no less than that of a man's waist...---Frederick Treves,

The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences

He awoke, sitting up, as always.

The ward maid would be in, in a moment, to give him his breakfast. To any normal man, the thin, watery porridge and the always mediocre coffee would have been highly dissatisfying. However, to Joseph Merrick, who had managed to escape across the continent without having his hideous features stir a sensation, it seemed to be a meal fit for royalty.

He looked, with his steadily worsening vision, about the small set of rooms he had been granted at Royal London Hospital. There, upon his mantle, was a picture of Her Royal Highness, Alexandra, Princess of Wales. He loved that photo, cherishing it almost as much as his own memento of his beloved mother, who had died when he was only twelve.

He moved with the labored pain and the intense effort of someone who did not feel it a blessing to see the beginnings of a new day. Indeed, hitherto, his life had been only the most dismal curse: unable to fend for himself, and turned out by a cruel stepmother, his only recourse had been the workhouse. And then, when he became even too sickened in the very depths of his soul for that, all that was left was to exhibit this hideous shell that God had seen fit to lend to him as a vessel for a pilgrim soul.

He ate slowly, relishing every nourishing drop of the bland stuff. Anything to stave off the hunger that he had always known, until now. He would never complain of the treatment he had received at the hands of his protectors: since Dr. Treves had

rescued him from an almost certain death in the foul slums of Whitechapel, he had done nothing but flourish. Happy, praise God, for the first time in his wretched life.

He closed his bleary eyes, and concentrated. His mind was a child's mind, in some respect, but ample in ways he could never explain to anyone else. He had an ability to see things, at times, without being physically present while they were occurring. These visions haunted him upon awakening, and the only way to dispel them was to simply close his eyes, and let them play out.

Now he saw Freddy, Dr. Treves, bent over a great table with a leather covering. It was in a room with a peaked ceiling, surrounded by an audience of bland-faced young men with high collars. Joseph knew this was an anatomical lecture, delivered to a group of medical students.

"Now, the proper study of the human body, gentleman, can only be fully accomplished by dissection and careful examination. The superstitions of our ancestors can no longer have any bearing upon our more serious calling as men of science...as healers, we are asked to become expert in our knowledge of disease, of anatomy, of the various ways in which we can aid the suffering of those who have fell prey to any number of afflictions and accidents. Observe--"

Freddy stepped to the side of the table, pulling back a long blue sheet. On the table, stretched out in what appeared to be a comfortable repose, was the body of a man who seemed to be in his mid-forties. His face had the drawn, anguished look of one who had met death in some foul hole of suffering, probably with a cheap bottle of gin clasped beneath his trembling fingers.

"This gentleman succumbed to Bright's Disease, no doubt brought on by his bondage to strong drink. He is known to have frequented houses of prostitution. Here is the final outcome of his debased life. May God have mercy on his soul..."

And Freddy took his scalpel, and began to cut a long, clean cut in the center of the man's chest. As Freddy began to "dissect" (a word Joseph would, certainly, have stumbled over, as he did a

great many words these days), his audience of young students began to turn pale; handkerchiefs were pulled from pockets and placed over mouths as grown men began to weaken from the sight.

Freddy simply stood there a moment, befuddled, listening to various hoarse coughs and the sound of a general, sweeping nausea.

Talking with Freddy

"I don't think you are using your time wisely, Joseph. Perhaps if you took up a more sensible daily routine, you would feel more mentally sound."

Freddy strode across the small rooms, looking at the model that had come to occupy most of Joseph's time. Joseph simply continued to stare out the window, looking into the relative emptiness.

These rooms had been afforded him, chiefly, because they were so remote: overlooking the back area of the hospital, a place where the iron bedsteads were painted, it was unlikely hysterical persons would get a glimpse of the steadily growing head or the heavily distorted features that formed such a cage for him. Here was his fantasy world: he was in command of two bare, basement rooms, wherein, he was not only a typical, common man, but even a gentleman. Here were the pictures sent to him by various women. Here were his model houses, his books, and the various toys generous, well-meaning (and, to be completely truthful, *wealthy*) individuals had sent him. He had a good, soft bed, heaped high with comfortable pillows, and time aplenty to enjoy the relative luxury of his new position. And he had Freddy, (whom he was always careful to address as Dr. Treves) and that was enough for him.

Besides, with only a Bible and Prayer Book, he had made it twenty four excruciating years. Now, he had finally come to a kind of blissful comfort.

Yet still, it was as if there was some thorn stuck into his flesh. Despite his good fortune, his full belly, his relative cleanliness, and above all, his *safety*, there were days when the hints of gray in a rainy dawn could wash from him all of his Christian fortitude. He would sit, on such occasions, humming some half-forgotten hymn deep inside his gross chest. He would thump his heavy, misshapen arm against his mattress, and lose his mind.

"I don't know Dr. Treves. Perhaps I should begin to study my Bible lessons again. I don't think that I remember their essential moral truths in quite the way that I should. Tell me: have you ever read the book of Job?"

Treves looked somewhat disdainful.

"Yes Joseph, in fact, I have read the entire Bible. And, you must have guessed by now, I'm sure, exactly how I feel about it. God is a human construction, my good man, not a verifiable fact: he was created in human minds, so that they might have some way to account for those mysteries that were essentially unfathomable to primitive man. Read Greek, Roman, Egyptian mythology: tales replete with episodes of supernatural intervention. Yet, Joseph, they are still only tales."

Joseph blubbered for a minute, a perplexed sound that he seemed, during times of intense consternation, unable to prevent from issuing.

"Dr. Treves, I am not one of your students," he said slowly. "And this is no lecture. I simply wanted to understand how you felt about the suffering that afflicted Job...do you feel that some men are just born to suffer?"

"I feel that if you continue in this fashion, Joseph Merrick, you will continue to be afflicted by the same intense melancholy that troubles you now. Self-pity is a luxury you cannot afford, sir."

Merrick considered a moment, and then looked back out the dusty pain of glass, at the thin strip of gray that revealed itself as the coming of a rain-choked dawn.

"Dr. Treves, do you remember what we talked about a few days ago? About the book you didn't want me to read."

Frederick Treves strode about Joseph's little hospital room, occasionally picking up a stray object or picture, and examining it absentmindedly.

"Oh. Oh, yes. *Frankenstein*, by the wife of the poet Shelley. A scandalous piece, my boy. Why sully your mind with such rubbish?"

"You didn't take it away from me though. I suppose you could have, Dr. Treves."

"I certainly shall, Joseph, if this is the effect it has on your mental state. But tell me: didn't you give me your solemn oath, that you would discard that particular loathsome piece of nonsense? As a gentleman?"

"Yes...well, of course I will abide by whatever your superior judgment dictates, Dr. Treves. I am simply so happy to be here, with all the kindness that has been shown me." Merrick fell back into his well-seasoned cringing.

"Still," began Treves slowly, "I suppose the novel itself is quite entertaining after its own ghastly fashion: murderous ghouls, mad doctors playing God, and such outlandishness. It should certainly be a far cry from the usual romances you peer into, old boy."

"To be perfectly honest, Doctor, I found the beginning to be rather tiresome...a letter from some explorer to women named Mrs. Saville. But after reading a bit more, I began to realize that I couldn't stop myself. It was as if the story took hold of my mind--"

"Exactly the danger of such sordid stories. Joseph, if we are ever to evolve as individuals, it will be because we have kept our minds on the most intellectually edifying stimulus, and kept it well away from such nonsense as *Frankenstein*. I can tell you, as a medical man, that the very idea of creating a monstrous individual from scraps of decaying human bodies is not only impossible---it is damned absurd."

"And the Creature...what must it have been like to be him?" Merrick wondered aloud, although Frederick Treves could tell that

he was simply asking himself a rhetorical question. Of course, Joseph knew exactly what it would be like to be Frankenstein's creation. That more than anything else, had disturbed Treves upon his learning that Joseph was reading the novel.

Who sent him the bloody thing? We are simply going to have to keep a closer inspection of the kinds of packages and gifts he receives. This was some bloody scoundrel's idea of a bad joke.

"Well, Joseph, I must be off. I have other patients to attend to. However, I do so much enjoy the little discussions we have. I am glad we here at London Hospital have been able to be of service to you."

Joseph revolved a bit on his bed, and hobbled to his feet. He was still in his dressing gown, and knew that he would shortly need his daily bath. Nurse Hildy would be in to fill the tub, and help him scrub his great, gross bulk free of the malignant stench that seemed to cling to him. He immensely liked this ritual, for reasons that he probably could never even admit to himself. And, also, it meant that he would have more company; anything to stave off the nagging, continual loneliness that had plagued him all his days.

"Yes, well, thank you very much Dr. Treves. You are, as always, a complete blessing to those that have been afflicted in their flesh."

"Don't put it that way, Joseph. I am simply a medical man...I have taken an oath, an oath to aid the sick. I am only sorry, you know, in your particular case..."

"That you cannot cure me?"

Frederick Treves felt his jaws clamp tightly for a moment, then simply let Joseph's question go unanswered.

"Good day, Mr. Merrick. I'll be back around within the next few days to see how you're feeling. If you need me, for any reason, do not hesitate to leave a message with the Nursing Staff. Until then, as your doctor, I would advise you to leave such rubbish as *Frankenstein* alone. It is a very poor novel, and the product of a morally--and even *artistically*--dubious school of

literary endeavor. It is such dross that is steadily weakening the moral fiber of society...oh; you can see it in the streets on a daily basis. Believe me; you can certainly see it in the Receiving Room."

"I shall certainly heed whatever advice you give me Dr. Treves."

"Well, Joseph, you don't want to tax yourself mentally...you've had a tremendous strain. Well, must be off. Good day, sir."

"Good day, Dr. Treves."

"And, one thing Joseph..."

"Yes?"

"Please, you don't always have to refer to me as Dr. Treves. We are friends, you and I. Just call me Frederick. Er, call me Freddy...all of the fellows at the club call me Freddy."

Frederick Treves hurried himself through the door, and Joseph Merrick felt the small bite of loneliness steal over him again. He went to his wardrobe, and pulled open the door with his delicate, perfect hand.

He had hidden it under a small bundle of bedclothes that needed laundering. It somehow deserved to be there, under the stench from his sweaty sheets. The forbidden book. The one Treves hadn't wanted him to have. *Frankenstein* or *the Modern Prometheus* by Mary Shelley. Joseph slightly trembled as he held it; it felt as if it was imbued with a strange, menacing power that was both exciting and distressing at the same time. He had never encountered anything quite like it.

He sat down, and opened to the page he had marked, having to go back a bit in the story.

"I did confess; but I confessed a lie. I confessed, that I might obtain absolution; but now that falsehood lies heavier at my heart than all my other sins. The God of heaven forgive me! Ever since I was condemned, my confessor has besieged me; he threatened and menaced; until I almost began to think that I was the monster that he said I was..."

Merrick read slowly, relishing the words. Seeing the prostrate woman, Justine Moritz, bent low on her anguished

knees, set his mind ablaze. She hadn't, really, been responsible for the death of little William, it had been the hideous *thing* that Frankenstein had crafted from his two hands, using the bodies of dead men. Merrick shuddered.

Where was Nurse Hildy? It seemed that the morning was slipping quickly by; the clock on the mantle already read half past nine. He usually had his bath much earlier. He continued onward, losing himself in the cramped print, not even realizing how physically tired he still was. Soon, he was asleep again.

Now he was standing in a dim cathedral. Stained glass windows revealed the Twelve Stations of the Cross. Merrick could see the Lord and Savior being broken by the scourge of an ancient Roman, who did not know that every bloodcurdling lash brought the human race one step closer to salvation. This place, he knew, was a paradise of suffering; a heaven of which he had never before been told; an Elysium for the distorted where all creatures of monumental bodily ugliness could find eternal peace

Before him, the graphic image of a beautiful human form unfurled as a sacred scroll. The artist, he knew, was Leonardo Da Vinci. It seemed to slowly dissolve into smoke, and a vast panorama of flesh swept past his vision: deformed arms and legs, broken joints, limp fingers, cadaverous and hollow cheeks, kicking legs, burst organs of purplish hue, mad faces contorted in agony; oceans of flesh, rivers of crippled carcasses.

And, in the center of it all, one face gaped like a drowning victim in the tides of a torrential ocean. He could not see this face, but it seemed to be screaming for help.

In the Tub Room

He awoke with a start. Cursing, softly, for the nightmares were, more and more, robbing him of his once comforting sleep. He tried to remove his deformed bulk from bed. Reaching for his cane, he hobbled half-asleep to his special chair, which had been designed to accommodate a body that did not adapt easily too many typical things. He stared off into the gloom. 10:30 and

where was his nurse? He did not like this feeling of being left abandoned, even for only a few moments. It put him in mind of his horrible journey across the continent. Alone, he was always vulnerable, always frightened.

Finally he began to hear steps in the corridor outside. Excellent. Then they would go to the tub room and he could sit in a bathful of delicious warm water, and be scrubbed. It was his piece of heaven's pie, and chiefest pleasure.

The Tub Room had once facilitated the treatment of mentally deranged persons, or so Merrick had been told. Now, it's bizarre apparatus and strange whirlpool bath stood dormant; as much of a forgotten space of the Royal London as his own set of rooms had been before he was given them to occupy. What was more, it was ideally suited to his need to not be seen by any other patient, as it was accessible by a back hallway used mainly as an entrance for hospital staff.

It was invariably Hildy Watkins who always bathed him; he could not figure out why it was she kept volunteering to do so, but Merrick sensed that Watkins was somehow different than the other Nurses that saw to his needs. And perhaps because even one so secluded as Merrick could occasionally pick up bits and pieces of gossip, he realized she was shunned by the other staff members, and considered "a bit of a loon".

Nurse Hildy bent low over him. Her face registered no disgust, no aversion; not even the slightest flicker of any emotion that was discernible at all. He was simply being cared for like any other patient. Briskly, but not roughly, she brought the sopping sponge over his masses of pendulous skin-flaps, and knobby, bony growths. Her face was homely, nearly masculine; her neck was as stiff and high as her collar. She rarely smiled, and even more rarely spoke. Yet, to Merrick, this daily ritual had become something as shamefully invigorating as his most secret, tainted thoughts.

"So, have you been sleeping well, Mr. Merrick?"

He spluttered some reply that she obviously could not

understand, but simply nodded an assent too. It seemed that of all the staff at Royal London, only Freddy had managed, through frequent exposure, to be able to understand him correctly. He sighed, inwardly, at the deep warmth of the water he was immersed in.

Nurse Hildy seemed very strange today; her expression seemed uncommonly flat, emotionless. Her huge, rough hands seemed to be reaching for areas of his body where a woman had never touched before. The sponge was sopping..

Oh, my...I can't believe the wonder of this feeling. To be able to lie back and let her hands move over me...I will never get as close to a woman as I am now...

Suddenly, he was no longer sitting in his bath, in the tub room, with a patient, tolerant nurse helping him cleanse the vile stink that always seemed to surround him. He was lost beneath the sweeping branches of some old chestnut tree, and he was no longer Merrick. He was somebody else.

He was a handsome young nobleman, riding a gallant steed across the green, rabbit-bitten pasture of some romantic fantasy. His brow was smooth, brown, quite normal and altogether handsome. His chest was a brawny mass of muscle instead of a hanging mass of flesh, and his hair trailed out behind him, gloriously thick and full. The sky was the deepest shade of blue, and autumn leaves blanketed the earth in spots with their yellow and brown.

He galloped over the heath, as majestic a vision of a man as had ever been conjured in the history of romantic novels. He carried a sword in a sheath at his hip, and of course, a pair of blunderbusses should he run into any scoundrels, or highwaymen.

But out here, in a vast expanse of beauty that seemed to roll on as far as the eye could see, he found only one solitary beautiful maiden, sitting beneath the sprawling branches of some old elm tree. She was reading poems to herself, almost certainly the love sonnets of the immortal William Shakespeare, the greatest of all English playwrights and poets.

Ah, the supernal beauty of that scene nearly drove him to intoxication. Oh! The absolute bliss of an all-consuming day dream was unequalled in his life. To escape, to really *escape*, being who he was. Why didn't God still perform miracles? He sometimes wondered, shamefully.

He approached the woman under the tree, his cloak blowing about him in the breeze, and, proclaimed her to be the most beautiful sight he had ever laid eyes upon.

She smiled, the warmest, most loving, most blissfully ignorant smile Merrick could possibly imagine within the confines of his heated skull. Oh, why must he be tortured so every day?

As he leapt from his black stallion, Merrick the Romantic Hero swept the lovely young woman into his arms, and planted a kiss upon her lips. Something that Merrick had never done.

And what else? What else could I do? It's so sickeningly delicious I'm ashamed to even think it.

He was so enraptured, he began nearly to weep. He could see the falling leaves; the rosebushes in the wealth of their red bloom, and the tall green grasses seemed to all gather around the two adoring young lovers and create a garland of petals, and stems, and natural beauty.

He fancied sweet music sweeping over the rolling field--- not the dismal piping of a circus calliope (which he always *bated*) or the fiddling of some drunken peasants, but a true, and masterful music like one imagined only the very rich could pay to go and listen to.

Suddenly, the music was interrupted by the flat and somewhat disconcerting tones of Hildy Watkins.

"Merrick? Mr. Merrick...we're finished."

His breathing, if she had even taken notice, had become increasingly ragged. But his breathing had never been good, and she seemed, at any rate, to be ready to help him up, dry him, and escort him back to his suite. Pity.

He did so like his daily bath.

Freddy at Home

Frederick Treves sat at his dining room table, meditating upon the precise arrangement of objects that constituted the plates and cutlery.

It was always a matter of arrangement with Anne--satisfaction was not accomplished until everything was securely and neatly put into its own respective category. Even people.

Merrick was "that poor kind Mr. Merrick--he is always so happy, in spite of things", and he himself was "my very bright and successful husband and doctor". She didn't know that Merrick often became so despondent that he could barely speak, or that he himself sometimes felt much less than successful, although for far different reasons than she might suspect. After having been married to her since '77, he had begun to see, more and more every year, just how incredibly barren of substance she was becoming. Since they had left Derbyshire, the situation had grown steadily worse. Now, he felt as if he was living with the ghost of Anne.

Dinner had been savory--roast duck--and now he was simply sitting here, his hunger sated, but an even deeper hunger gnawing around the edges of his being.

His wife, God bless her, had had to tolerate quite a bit from him: the long hours, the irritable moods, and the foul language. It was part and parcel to his calling. It was what the wife of any moderately successful physician should expect, and Frederick Treves was far better than "moderately" successful.

No where in the world is there a machine that moves with the precision of my family. Now, my wife has gone to sit in the parlor, fanning herself with an old envelope and humming softly. Soon, my children shall join her, and lastly, I will be expected to emerge from the dark abyss of my study and join them. Then we will idle away a few hours until it is time for the children to be sent to bed. Conversation will center upon the most mundane, trivial aspects of a life that can hardly be called anything but stifling. "Freddy dear, we really must take a holiday in the country", and "How has that poor, suffering soul Mr. Merrick been?" Wimpole Street, and the Royal London,

and rising at five in the morning, and cutting open corpses...Is this all that I ever wanted in life? This bloody cage...

Treves looked out of the dining room window and down the long, dusty street at rattling hansoms and children playing. Suburbs. Affluence. It made little difference. Even an animal that was caged comfortably was still caged.

Merrick...Merrick would never, in his life, escape his cage. How did he manage, Treves wondered, to simply putter in a small set of rooms, kept largely to himself? Alone, save for a few wary thrill-seekers eager to maintain their sense of chic by lavishing affection upon... Well, even Treves could not deny that Merrick was simply a freak; albeit, with a rudimentary intellect that set him above, in Treves mind, many people whose appearance was entirely normal.

Treves shivered inside. His life looked as still, as placid as a quiet country lake. Yet, he knew as surely as he knew the essential facts concerning Scrofula, that this was not correct, in the most essential way.

It had begun to disturb him at night. Lying in bed, Anne curled away from him in her own tight cocoon of petty concerns and conventional guilt's, he had seen it creep across a wall. Like a many-legged spider, it wrapped itself around the darkness, and its own hideous, deathless black shade cut a streak of pure, agonized hate against the pitch shades of midnight in his bedroom.

Slowly, it inched closer, meandering toward him, and he had been as immobilized with fright as any child in the throes of utter nightmare.

What is happening to me?

Then, morning after morning--emptiness. Oblivion. No feeling. No love.

Dick Neville Strikes Out

It was in a disused room off the kitchen, where Dick Neville frequently went in the early morning to have himself a nip of the

flask, and a quick smoke. Occasionally he would be joined by a small gaggle of nurses, catching a few minutes repose between looking after patients.

Dick was a skinny, angular fellow, whose bottom jaw was frequently covered with a very scrubby, sandy beard. Alcohol and cricket, along with womanizing, formed the triad of his major obsessions in life. It was not his fault, he reckoned; dad had been a rascal, and his father before him.

But he did have a certain lingering, rugged handsomeness about him, and a certain charm that had enabled him to claim a number of sexual conquests that had only begun, in his forties (and to his deep regret) to have tapered off.

But, then, that didn't mean he was going to quit trying.

It had been himself, an older woman employed as a ward maid, and Hildy Watkins who had been sitting in the dark alcove behind the kitchen, passing around Dick's ever-ready flask and talking in low, murmured voices, so as not to attract the attention of their superiors.

"Did you say the way he looked at me when I told 'em that? Did you see it?" He laughed, quietly; a throaty, raspy chuckle that was well-seasoned by gin and tobacco use.

The ward maid, who fancied she wouldn't mind having a go with Dick herself said, "like somebody had set his arse on fire, luv. Oh, it was a real sight!"

"Yeah," said Dick, "but if he ever gives me any of his lip again, I'll box his ears, I will. I won't stand for insolence from the likes of him. Nobby little shite!"

Hildy Watkins had ambled in unexpectedly, with not a solitary idea of what the two of them were actually talking about. Nor, did it seem, that she cared.

Her appearance always seemed to quiet a room, somehow. It was as if she carried with her a sort of disquieting cloud. It was in her eyes, Dick reckoned, that you could see it; the haunted, vapid gaze of someone that was just not, entirely, in possession of all her faculties. Or, as he often put it, "off her bleeding nut!"

She had come in and sat down at one of the battered tables, without saying a word. And right behind her, blowing in like a hurricane, was the the Head.

Dick cringed. He quickly put his flask back in his jacket, and began to try and slip out beside her, hoping she would be too preoccupied to even notice him. But he didn't get two steps, when she cried, sharply, "And just where do you think you're going?"

He turned his head, his heart, all of a sudden, hammering in his chest, and said, "Well, I got another hour before the shift ends, and I--"

"You were in here wasting time, was what you were doing!" She cut him off abruptly, placing her hands on her hips, with a look in her face that might have made the most sadistic school master envious.

"Do you think I'm too stupid to know what goes on around here when my back is turned? You all had better watch yourselves, if you want to continue working here at The London. You know, you aren't the only man in the streets we could hire for a *porter*."

He stood there a moment, and consciously fought back the urge to reach up and pound her flat across the bridge of the jaw. My! He hated to be yelled at by a woman. Didn't seem right, somehow, that any woman besides your mother could make you feel so little, and Dick's mother had been dead for over ten years. Instead, he simply said, "Sorry, mum. I was just talking to Barbara here for a minute. Didn't think a thing in the world of it."

She gave him the queerest look, the look of someone who was trying, desperately, to be patient with a mentally impaired child. Then, as if she had exhausted whatever rage she could focus on him, she turned on Nurse Watkins and said, "And you girlie! You're lucky you weren't sacked a month ago. You had better shape up by the end of the week, or it's going to be out the door with yer. Do you understand me? Stand up when I'm speaking to you!"

Hildy Watkins stood up from where she sat at the table.

Her eyes--her very strange, gray eyes--looked directly into the Head's. The Head Nurse fairly hissed.

She saw something she didn't quite like there.

"I suppose I do." Hildy said.

"Yeah, well, just see to it that you at least try...I've got a mind to just let you go--*right now!*"

Hildy looked at her as if she might be speaking Chinese. Barbara Meadows still stood speechless in the corner, feeling as if her bladder might burst. Dick had turned to try and sneak out again, but Eva beat him to the punch. She turned, hissed, and flew out the door in an exasperated frenzy. He sighed. He had come close to losing his job, and he didn't have anything substantial saved to fall back on, if he did.

"Well," he turned to Barbara, "ain't you the lucky one? She didn't give you near the dressing down she did us."

"Old bitch. Foul old bitch." Barbara looked glum. *Well*, she thought, *it's either this or starving*.

"You got that right," agreed Dick. "What she needs is a good fucking to cure her. Or, kill her!"

They both began to laugh. Hildy turned and looked at them, and said, "You should stop that laughter. You shouldn't say things like that. I don't like it. It's sinful, it is."

Suddenly, with a nervous cry, she turned and hurried out the door. Dick Neville turned to Barbara, and said, "And there goes another one. How in the bleedin' hell did she ever get hired on? She belongs in Colney Hatch."

Still, he thought, *I wouldn't mind having a peep at her with her knickers down*.

"You know the only reason they keep her, don't you luv?"

He shook his head.

"She's the only one that don't mind bathing *him*."

"Bathing? Bathing who?"

"Ah, Dick, if you were any slower you'd be crawling, dear. Bathing *Merrick*, that's who. She's the only one who wants to do it. She always volunteers. You're right: she's out of her bloody

mind."

Dick was aghast.

"Ah, bloody hell! You don't say?"

He turned and looked at the doorway where she had just left.

"So how are you feeling today, Joseph? Only your best, I hope."

Joseph could not smile, but said as cheerily as it was possible for him to convey, considering his limitations, "Very good, Freddy. Not a care in the world, and like a new man, altogether."

Treves was faintly amused at Merrick's choice of words. He said, "So. Have you considered any alterations in your daily routine that might possibly help you to stave off this melancholy that seems to have got a hold of you lately? I was thinking, perhaps, if you applied yourself to some rigorous course of study; maybe we could obtain for you some texts, or something."

Merrick considered. There were, it was true, huge gaps in his knowledge of the world. His formal education had been limited to around six years. But, be that as it may, he would still rather read his novels. Schoolbooks seemed dreadfully stuffy.

"And what subjects would you suggest, doctor?" Joseph was tired of the topic, but decided to ply Treves, to see how hard he had actually thought about his proposal.

"Oh, well, numbers, grammar, history...what, er, would you be interested in knowing about? I would hope a little of everything..."

"I am always interested in learning new things, doctor. But, it becomes very distracting trying to concentrate on some subjects if they do not, uh, have the same kind of dramatic effect on me as do many of my novels. Schoolbooks give me a headache."

Treves smiled. He understood the overwhelmed feeling that sometimes plagued young scholars. He had suffered it enough, coming up through medical school.

"Well, Joseph, I simply wish you to have a better understanding of the world and how it works. Education is the key to happiness, to mental well-being; an educated man is a successful man."

Suddenly, Treves regretted he had even brought the topic up. It was pointless. If Joseph wanted to while away his reading hours on rubbish, then who was Treves to say nay? What would Merrick ever accomplish with an overabundance of education? He couldn't even walk out of his front door in the daylight.

"Freddy, do you know what subject endlessly fascinates me?"

Treves looked at him bemusedly.

"What, pray tell?"

Merrick seemed uncomfortable for a minute, but then bent close to him in his chair, and said, "Dreams. Dreams fascinate me. It seems that there is no end to the outlandish dreams that I have"

Treves considered for a moment. Well, it made sense. Someone that had had Merrick's life would obviously, from time to time, be afflicted with strange dreams.

"Well, Joseph, all I can say to you is that I am not trained as an alienist. Dreams are a perplexing phenomenon of the brain; when we sleep, it seems to be as if we lose all conscious control of our thoughts, and our brain becomes unbound by the inhibitions and restraints put upon it in waking life. Oddly, there is a young Viennese physician I've recently read who is doing quite a lot of research in that particular field...What was the gentleman's name? Ah, it escapes me. At any rate, what sort of dreams are you having?"

Merrick stopped to consider for a moment. Then said, "Well, they are simply peculiar. There is always some man there. Dressed in black. And then the man takes me to some land, some far off place. And then I wake up, and the rest I can't remember."

Treves looked intrigued. Probably, this was Joseph's way of dealing, at some level, with his abandonment by the sideshow entrepreneur in Belgium. That bastard was probably coming to

haunt Joseph in his nightmares.

"Does the man look familiar to you, Joseph? I mean, does he seem like a man that you've seen somewhere?"

"Yes...and no." Merrick was really carefully dancing around some issue. It made Treves slightly nervous.

"Yes and no? Well, which is it?"

"Well," began Merrick slowly. "It's as if, some part of me knows he who is, but it's a part of me that can't quite remember. It's like, I know him deep inside, but I don't know what to call him. My soul knows him."

Treves suddenly hit a brick wall. Here it was again, Merrick's bloody religion.

"Joseph, Joseph," he sighed, "You mean your *mind*, my friend. Your soul and your mind are one in the same. In fact, I should say you envision the soul through the lens of your mental development. The brain is an incredible organ, sir, and I would be a liar if I told you that we understand how it functions. But Joseph, your dreams, while they are interesting, is still only an illusion. Products of the sum total of your learning and experience in life."

"But it is always so real, Freddy. It's almost like I can reach out and touch things---for instance, I had the most incredible dream the other night, and when I woke up the next day, t'was as if I hadn't slept a wink at all." Merrick seemed on the verge of piecing something together, but it was something that was beyond him and after a moments silence, Treves spoke up and said, "Well, I wouldn't let it worry me, old man. I have never had a dream that I felt there was anything to fear from." He smiled; it would be a cold day in hell before he actually related to Joseph some of the case histories he knew of people dying in their sleep from apparent fright. He didn't feel, particularly, like there was any dangers of that happening here, but why encourage Joseph's preoccupation.

"Well, probably you are correct, doctor. It's not something I'm going to let trouble me unduly."

"As well you shouldn't. I've always told you to put whatever fear you may have felt in the past to rest. You are in hospital, and here you will stay. This is your home, and we are going to make sure that you have nothing to worry about."

Merrick pulled himself to his feet, and extended his hand. He didn't want Freddy to leave, yet, but he knew the doctor was bound to his duties, and at any rate, soon it would be bath time again. Besides, he knew the workmen were coming back to Bedstead today to lay some more new bricks. He should have some people to talk to in between working on his models, answering his mail, and reading the rest of *Frankenstein*.

And, who knew? There might even be a caller or two today, to help keep him cheery.

He had cornered her in the back hallway, behind the ward where they usually kept older patients suffering from dementia. He had seen her pushing a cart with empty food trays, and he had been unable to stop himself. Easy mark.

He walked up to her casually, knowing they were relatively secluded in that area.

"And how are you this morning, my lovely pet?" Dick Neville came close to her as she stood there, acting as nonchalant as if he had stopped her to talk about the weather.

Hildy Watkins gave him the same stone cold stare she presented to everyone in the world.

"Oy, no need to be so cold to old Dicky. You should really be alot friendlier. Smile. Your face looks like it deserves one."

She simply continued to stare, blankly. *My*, he thought to himself. *Her eyes are as strange as they are lovely. Look like cat's eyes.*

Slowly, he began to move his hand closer to her elbow, and she did nothing to stop him.

"Oh, you're agreeable lass, then? I did not think that it would be so."

He came up very close to her then, and tried to move his hand up the rough material of her uniform. She simply stood

there, as uncomprehending as a side of meat.

"Ooooh, yes, you and me and are going to be best mates, we are." His breathing became ragged. He had pushed her, slowly, away from the cart and up against the corridor wall.

If they catch me at it now, I am done for. I might as well pack my bags. Old Eva will sack me without even a second thought.

"Well...c'mon, girl. I ain't got all day."

He was half expecting her to turn and lift her skirts for him, but she simply stood there, as if made of wood. It was then that he caught a whiff of the strange odor.

It was not the smell of sweat; he knew that odor well enough. It was something meatier, randier; like something had been left in a room on a hot day, and left to decay. It had not really been very noticeable at first, but the longer he stood next to her, the stronger it became. Now, it seemed to be the most overpowering odor in the room.

"Uh," he exclaimed in disgust. "Wot the hell have you been into?"

He had lost all his passion; it fell flat, and cold. Now, all he wanted was to get outside, and into the fresh air. And get the hell away from Hildy Watkins.

She saw him back away. She stepped past him and back to her cart. He simply stood there, with the same disgusted look on his face. Before she walked on though, she did one thing that made his blood run absolutely cold.

She smiled.

"Right out of a bleedin' nightmare," he murmured in disgust.

The Doctor is Sick

Freddy was standing by the window, looking out into the square. "Well, it seems they've almost completed the work on the new wing. They do things so bloody quickly now. Not like in my day."

Joseph had looked at him for a moment. Freddy was so

admirable a sight; tall, mustachioed, and handsome in a way that few men could really hope to ever equal. A dashing figure--but today not looking altogether happy.

"Yes, Doctor. I have had quite a good time sitting and watching all of the activity that's taking place out there. The workmen are always so good to stop and speak to me during the day. Do you know I actually got to show a Mr. Edward, the foreman, my picture of Her Royal Highness? He was very happy about it, and asked me all sorts of questions about what it was like to have actually been introduced to the Princess of Wales."

Treves grinned, knowing that Merrick would, almost certainly, never in his life forget that particular moment.

We have already marked his memory for the better. I am very pleased that he seems to be forgetting some of the trouble he has had in the past.

"Very good. I do believe, as your physician, that the more interaction that you have, while you are here, the better off you are. You are a normal man, essentially. I believe that Mr. Edwards has probably realized that."

If Joseph could have smiled, he would have beamed. It did wonders for him for Treves to stroke his ego, call him "normal". It was going to be a bright day, God bless.

Treves seemed unduly tired, though. Joseph, after having looked at his friend in all sorts of moods nearly every day for the past two years, could well see that.

"I should doubtless be getting back, Joseph. It has been a most tiresome morning, already. An accident at the railway brought several men in for our immediate attention, and I was several hours simply applying bandages and trying to staunch bleeding. And you know, full well, what it is like when the common crowds carry them in: one man being lifted and passed down a row of onlookers, all promoting chaos. It's nearly insufferable, what you have to fight your way through simply to attend the sick and injured."

Merrick listened intently, and then said, "But, you do not feel well, today. Do you doctor? I can see it. I think you may be

coming down with some sort of illness in your own right."

Treves looked at him, suddenly annoyed. What was Merrick a doctor now, that he could tell *him* what was wrong with him? But he said,

"Very kind of you to notice Joseph. Yes, I have been under something of a strain lately. Keeping up private practice, volunteering here, and also trying to be father, husband, and diplomat. I'm afraid you don't quite know how much of a burden it can put upon a person."

Merrick withdrew from him, then, a little. He supposed he also took a considerable amount of the doctor's attention.

"I hope it is nothing that I have done, Freddy? I mean, you don't have to see me, *every* morning, I suppose."

Treves suddenly felt very bad. Joseph had interpreted his remark in the only that he possibly could have--an insinuation that he was an additional burden to Treves. He could see the dejection creep over his friend.

Merrick, for his part, could make no facial expressions. The deformities forbid it. But Treves had learned to read his eyes---truly, he thought, the windows to the soul. Or, at least Joseph's soul, at any rate.

"Oh, Joseph, I didn't mean it quite the way that you seem to have taken it. I enjoy our time together immensely. You know that. I always manage to learn something new from you every single day."

Merrick brightened somewhat, but was left with the feeling that his friend was in need of some kind of attention. And, after all the kindnesses that Freddy Treves had shown him in his life, Joseph began to wish desperately to be able to figure out exactly what, in his limited power, he might do to help.

I suspect you do learn from me, dear Doctor---just as I always learn from you. Just as I have learned from you, today, that there is something wrong that you cannot confess.

With Reverend Valentine

This is the song of thy suffering servant,
This is God's hobbling little poem,
This is a psalm for the New Age,
I drone on in His image.

---Kenneth Sherman,
Words for Elephant Man

"Joseph, you wanted to see me?"

Reverend Valentine was a little man, with a beet red complexion and thinning gray hair. His knock was sturdy; it was self-assured, and he always struck everyone he talked with as having the same way about his religion as he did with his interactions with others. He was confident, not given to doubts, and knew that God was master of heaven and earth. Amen.

Merrick had actually wanted to see him about attending chapel services at the hospital. Something had been tugging him lately, tugging at his sense of assurance and his basic pleasure. Oh, he had read his Bible, and tried to work it out in prayer, but it had simply refused to leave him alone. He was suffering; he couldn't seem to see the light at the end of the tunnel any longer.

"Yes, Reverend. I have some little things I want to discuss with you."

The good Reverend entered and made himself comfortable at the little circular table where Joseph took his meals. *Already*, he thought, *the morning is proving to be sobering*.

Reverend Valentine had seen Joseph on several occasions, and had become quite use to his appearance by now. But, his speech was a different matter, and the conversation they had was strange, and punctuated by not a few "beg your pardon's" from Tristram Valentine.

"Well, Reverend, it's just that I've felt so, well, melancholy lately. I don't quite know how to explain it...do you think God, understands, I mean, when we are feeling bad, and can't quite seem to find it within ourselves to be of good cheer, as the book

says we ought to?"

Reverend Valentine very carefully chose his words here. He knew that if he was Joseph Merrick, questions of faith would be a daily struggle. Upon first meeting him, he wondered how the man had managed to survive as well as he did.

"Brother Merrick," he began, "I think that God knows, truly, what is in each and every heart. I don't think there is anything, particularly, *unnatural* in a person, especially one who has experienced such difficulties as you, having doubts...if that is what you are talking about. Is it not?"

Merrick considered.

"I suppose it is. But it isn't really a doubt about the existence of God--I don't doubt that at all. It's just that, well--"

"You have reservations about exactly why it is that things have to be the way they are, don't you Joseph? Well, all I can tell you is what Jesus himself said to the disciples." He sat at one of the chairs that had been brought down to accommodate Joseph's visitors, and opened his own weather-beaten Bible.

"Ah, see, here it says, *Luke* chapter 9 verse 48, '...for he that is least among you all, the same shall be great.' You see, to God, even the least of his servants is counted amongst the most valuable. So---there is no reason for you to be despondent, my friend. God knows the secrets of your heart, and he knows how good you are."

Joseph sank somewhat. This did little to ease his mind, but he said, "I have tried so hard to keep faith with *him*. But I have to wonder: why did he make me as I am? What was his reasoning?"

Tristram Valentine sighed deeply. This was going to be difficult.

"Joseph, have you read the book of *Job*?"

"Yes. Of course." How could he not have? He damn near lived by it.

"Then," began the Reverend," you must remember what it says in chapter 40 verse 2: 'Shall he that contendeth with the Almighty, instruct him? He that reproveth God let him answer

It...' "

Joseph finished for him, quoting, "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay my hand upon my mouth..."

"You know your scriptures well, my friend." The Reverend was taken a little aback. What to say to this man to console him?

"Joseph...Brother Merrick, we are all Gods children. In my life, I have seen countless examples of human suffering. We are not in this world because it is paradise: this world has fallen from grace. It is only by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that we may hope to achieve salvation, in the next world."

Joseph looked at him, but that verse was still running in his mind.

"Behold, I am vile..."

Remembering and Forgetting

Of his early days I could learn but little. He was very loath to talk about the past. It was a nightmare, the shudder of which was still upon him.

---Frederick Treves

Joseph sat alone in his rooms, looking at the model cathedral he was building, and relishing the fact that he was creating from his only ugly lump of imagination something beautiful; majestic really, something that he almost felt could outlive him...It would be done soon, no need to rush himself.

He laid out his new toys across his writing desk. Cigarettes, bah...he never saw the point in them, and thought them a little sinful, maybe...he awkwardly tried to put one of the odd little things into his misshapen mouth, and was rewarded by a mouthful of foul tasting tobacco. He spit vehemently, and got up to hobble over to his nightstand for a glass of water.

Alcohol, on the other hand, he had imbibed before. Freddy had brought a bottle down to the rooms, on Christmas Eve, after a staff party, and they had busily gotten rather drunk together...master and pupil. Soon they were joined by Dick

Neville, the night porter, who brought his own flask of whisky, and claimed he thought himself quite lucky to be drinking with someone who had become as well known to the readers of the *Times* as Joseph had.

"Oy," he said, "it's like 'aveing a pint with the bloomin' Duke of York."

Merrick found this wickedly funny, though it was probably more the alcohol than anything, and the two men became quite concerned when he got himself choked up because of the exertion of his strange, piping laughter.

"Alright Joseph?" Freddy (less than sober at this point himself) halfway rose from his chair. But Merrick had already righted himself by this point, and the two men relaxed, conversation quickly turning back to trivialities and jests.

"I don't reckon you'll say anything to old Eva 'bout me having a nip on duty, will you, Boss?" Dick looked the least little bit concerned.

"Um, no...No, of course not. Your secret is safe with me Dick; just don't make it into a regular habit."

"Merry Christmas, Dr. Treves."

"Merry Christmas, Dick."

Treves considered, "Boss?"

Neville laughed, "Yeah, I use to work for a Texan. Name of Morris. He was a well-off gent. Guess I picked up some of the American words from him."

Merrick began to say something, and of course it was only Treves that could barely understand it. Dick Neville looked over at Treves as if for an interpretation.

"Joseph, you must try and slow your speech abit. Mr. Neville can barely understand what you are saying."

"I want to tell you about something, Freddy. I want to tell you about the time right before I came here. When I got off at Liverpool Street Station..."

Treves felt his mind wandering, but said, "Well, alright, go on..."

"Heard they did you a good one, Mr. Merrick. Some bloody foreigner ran out and left you stranded in Belgium. Then you got mobbed at Victoria by a bunch of street hoodlums, am I right?"

Dick Neville was interested in this, having an affinity for hard luck stories that had been well-developed by years of drinking at various and sundry pubs.

But Treves suddenly interjected. "Oh, Joseph, it's Christmas Eve. Why let yourself be brought down by going over and over the same rubbish...It isn't healthy for you. And Christmas isn't the time for dwelling on matters that might tend to dispirit us."

Joseph considered a moment, then said, "But, I have, you know, been considering writing it all down, some day...Do you think that anyone would ever be interested in knowing about all the things that have happened to me?" Joseph's voice had taken on the child-like quality that was always a little uncanny, and a little pitiful.

"Well," began Treves, "if that is your intention, then I applaud it. It seems as if it might have some therapeutic value to you. I believe that you should. What do you think, Dick?"

"Well, bless me, o' course! Why, I rather fancy a good honest story about good honest folk...not like a made up tale, but something that really 'appened to a fellow." This was only partly true; he actually rather liked stories about criminals, murderers, and counterfeiterers as opposed to stories about the struggles of the common man. But he couldn't tolerate fiction, which he felt was, "cheating-like". A tragic tale would do.

Merrick, quite suddenly, launched into an interesting (if rather convoluted) narrative, skipping around the events of several years back, seemingly trying to put his thoughts and memories into some sort of coherent pattern. Alcohol had turned him into a fledgling storyteller.

This was all very difficult to understand, for Dick, who had, upon several occasions, had to ask Treves for clarification of what Joseph was saying. Finally, at some point in the dead of night,

Dick looked at his watch in panic, and excused himself to go make his rounds. Treves, who sat enraptured, barely noticed his going. He was going to have hell to pay on Christmas morning, he realized, but he knew he could scarcely return home until Merrick had confided in him all that he wished to.

As it turned out, he made his way back to Wimpole Street by the first light of dawn, and Anne had been waiting for him, already dressed and ready to begin the family celebrations. The look on her face had been icy derision, accusatory, almost as if to say *you've been with bloody Merrick all night, haven't you? Couldn't you leave him alone, and be with your own family, on Christmas Eve?*

He had simply gone to freshen up, and they both proceeded to put the best face possible on the children's celebration. Dinner had been served cold, that Christmas.

Merrick looked through his dressing kit at a few more toys: hairbrush, no good...tooth brush...well; he was mostly consigned to *gumming* his food. Well, why the bloody hell had he wanted it anyway? Even he wasn't exactly sure. He got up for a moment and fetched his pen. He carefully replaced all the items from his dressing kit, and pulled a few sheets of paper from his desk. He was going to attempt to put the story of his life down *his way*. He loved to write, having many correspondents (mostly ladies, he thought, smiling inwardly), but he was usually somewhat vague with them concerning particulars of where he had been and where he had come from. Let gossip say what he wouldn't, he thought. He took pen to paper.

There was a first, initial, barrier to get across; it seemed like he never could just sit down and write without going through some sort of internal struggle.

It was all very taxing, to begin with. Remembering the past was unpleasant; much better to just sit and scratch some lines of poetry, or work on one of his silly sketches (he had one about the misadventures of a blundering policeman that had brought a smile to even Treves, who had been so dour of late). But with his

life story it was much more difficult.

Tom Norman, of course, had made him pen his own little biography for some piece of rubbish that was sold to show patrons willing to cough up an extra few cents. It had been a miserable little scrap of paper, with a quite bad (or so Joseph thought) illustration of himself on it. He had essentially hurried through all the details of his life, not particularly interested if it came off as great literature.

At long last, he began scribbling some notes, looking backward at events that stood out with absolute clarity in his mind.

When he was done he had a few sentences, and a few sentences scratched out--perhaps half a page of coherent writing. It was no use. It simply wasn't going to come today. He sat back in his chair and peered out the window as rain pattered dismally against the pane.

It had been a trip across the continent.

The chatter of foreign tongues, the great sweeping expanses of country. But always he was hidden. Always alone.

Ferrari. Joseph could barely spit out the name these days. He had taken Joseph's paltry earnings, and tossed him aside, leaving Joseph to make his way back to English soil on a muttered prayer.

How had he done it? Even he was not sure, and not even hunger was his chief concern. As always, it was detection...

Cowering in every corner, shambling softly, but never less than a spectacle. There was simply no way to spirit himself anywhere without the vile outdoor garments that were every bit as shocking to normal persons as his own monstrous head and distorted face.

The mask, his peaked hat, and his great, operatic cloak---where in bloody hell had Tommy Norman managed to find such stuff? No matter, it was as essential that he be covered outdoors as it was for him to have his walking stick whenever he had to

navigate his sickening bulk across the floor.

It had been at the train station, running from a mob that developed, when finally his mind had simply gone for a little while. He truly was an animal, for the first time---and not even Leicester workhouse had been able to wipe the Blood of Christ from his soul. But when he was set upon by those dirty beggar children, and chased like a screaming child he knew finally what the hunted beast knew, and it had burned away part of the great white soul which had sustained him so long.

He could have killed them then; he could have set fire to their beautiful, normal bodies. Oh, his terror and his poverty, and his helpless state were nothing then---because, crouched low in the darkness, with two police constables doing their best to hold closed a set of double doors leading to where he hid, he first felt the hideous python of total malice wind inside.

It was dreadful beyond dreadful. There was nothing even in *Frankenstein* to do it justice. He simply wanted to be safe, to eat and sleep, to cleanse from himself the dirt and grime of filthy fingers and prying, incredulous eyes. His road had wound through a bewildering itinerary of tiny countries, yet here, on his native soil, they were going to tear him to shreds.

Bastards, he thought. Vile, dirty bastards...he wanted to place his little, perfect had around all of their throats and squeeze. What right had they to mock him? What right had they to chase after him like some bloody dog, when it was they who had the normal bodies, and the loving women, and the sun shining on their naked, unashamed faces?

He had seen it then--a vision almost all-embracing in its intense and utterly supernatural hold. It had had a black head, piercing eyes that burned fire that must have been the cold fire of eternal damnation, and a mass of hair that was writhing tentacles. Its skin had been the color of rotting, and it had hissed at him from some cold, eternal cellar where only death and nightmares brood.

"Joseph!" It had hissed, drawing his name out with a

serpentine quality that, in his trembling mind, he knew must have held the same quality as that original demon which tempted the Mother of Man to eat the forbidden fruit.

That voice had seemed to contain the same sort of hatred and disgust that he had been treated with by his stepmother: it was tempting and frightening in the same stroke; it sucked the very love from your bones and replaced it with a feeling that was as cold and lifeless as a side of chopped meat. At that moment, if he had been able, he would have poured hot lead on the entire scene.

Finally, after the mob had been dispersed, one of the officers had come back inside, parting the filthy drape he had crouched behind, and asking him to remove his hood.

He had blubbered protest, but no one could ever understand him, and after they nearly forcibly removed it, their shock had been only too real. Grown men had paled; hardened policemen had become white and stood speechless. What were they to do with him? One supposed he might be foreign, or something.

Finally he had reached into the folds of his great cloak and hit upon a tiny square of cardboard that had been given him some time ago. It had been during his visit to "ospital", as Tommy called it. He had been paraded in front of another shocked audience, and his body had been put to the rigors by a strange little fellow...doctor...doctor...Joseph could not, now, even remember the name.

They had photographed him; he had never seen what those particular images of himself, nor did he ever want to. But now he took the battered square of cardboard from his cloak, and handed it to the constable.

The officer seemed slightly less bewildered. Finally, they hit upon a course of action: hire a cab, take him back to London Hospital, and get him to Treves...that was the gentleman's name. It was not their problem; it was for medical science to reason out, and such a man as this had no business parading in public, causing

disturbances.

Finally, exhausted, limp, they helped him up into the waiting handsome. He made no further attempt to speak; in fact, it had made no difference to them whether he could or not. Anything he had to say bore no relevance in relation to the grotesque feature which always swallowed up any form of communication.

London streets were filthy; in them, people put out of meager tenements because of outcry brought on by well-intentioned social reformers, died in poverty anyway. Worse off they were, in fact, for the streets meant cold death to the London poor. Dirt. Dust. Peering normal faces; they were ugly, toothless, but they were normal.

Squalor choked the East End like a psychopathic lover. One could find wanton girls of nine years selling themselves to an entire class of gentleman who, somehow, found it fashionable to go slumming. But what did it matter to him, who was sitting in a hansom cab? He laughed at the miserable irony of life...a child made his way down the side of Mile End Road, dragging a stick behind him. Clothing torn, legs dirty, face old and tired and haggard. If he was lucky, that boy might find a job working fourteen hours a day. Joseph could not smile, but again he laughed.

Two warring factions inside of his fractured consciousness tormented him. In fact, had beaten him harder than anyone ever had, and would not leave him alone during that long, interminable ride to final safety...to the waiting bosom of charity, Treves, visitors and callers, good books, good food, and a warm, safe bed.

The first was hate. He was suffocating under the weight of abominable, nearly psychotic rage. It had not been his fault that he was hideous to look at; it was God's choice, and damn God for the inscrutable ways in which he meted out destinies in the world. No, if he did not meet the human standard, if he was afflicted like no one else walking the earth, then, in reality, he was not one of

them. Not human. A monster; then, well, bloody hell, if he could not inspire friendship he would inspire dread.

His other half, his real spirit, looked a lot like the angel face of his own dead mother; she who had taught him the glory of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus, whom they had pierced in his hands and in his feet, and who had given his life to cleanse the world of all unrighteousness, so that man may have eternal life...

Joseph remembered his cherished mother, Mary. He remembered her gentle, peaceful smile, her large rough hands that had seemed as soft and comforting as any pillow he had ever lain upon. Her body had been crippled, true; it seemed to be the curse of his line that they could never be whole and vital in the flesh.

Why had his brother died of scarlet fever, and he been allowed to grow and mutate into something that even he cared not to look at in the polished surface of any glass? Was it because God was fair? And if God ordained such suffering, then what good was he? Somewhere, Joseph could hear that depraved vision he had seen hiss his name.

Kill. Run. Cries...limp. No more. Fading out. Let God decide where he should go. God kept all the universe spinning. He should be able to set a hansom on the right course.

The Sideshow Caravan

He roused himself for a moment, having become lost in his own recollections, and nearly forgetting where it was he was at. The sun had never really been out all day, and, damn it, why wouldn't the interminable gloom ever seem to lift? Already it was evening, and he could have sworn he had seen no light the entire day. He shuffled to the window, and cursed at it.

Why? Why always trapped behind some barrier? His flesh, his enormous head, his mangled face. It all constituted the prison from which there was no escape, and yet, it seemed, he was now living an illusion of escape that had been provided him by his benefactors, London Hospital, and, most particularly, Frederick

Treves.

But still he understood himself as a caged creature, as confined in a gilded cage as he was behind the curtain of a sideshow tent. And, despite the low opinion he knew Treves had of the man, Tom Norman had never done him any wrong.

It had simply been a matter of circumstances. Old Tommy had sent him on tour because the English wouldn't have him. Policemen kept shutting them down at every turn, and so when that stinking Ferrari had shown up with his stinking offer of an international tour, well... Tommy had only had his best interests in mind.

The itinerary included a bewildering list of tiny hamlets, because the metropolitan police of whatever major city they entered always seemed to show up in time to keep them from making any real money. It drove Ferrari mad, and gave Joseph an uncommon dislike for the uniformed man. Oh well, all it had amounted too was a bunch of dismal country traveling, through rain and mud, uncomfortable as hell.

He looked out at the sunset. Sunset---why did it mean so much to him?

He knew. It was because, after nightfall, he was free.

Sunset.

A caravan of carriages moved across the barren countryside. Dwarves, She males, hairy men, Siamese twins, fat ladies, clowns, the Mentalist, the Geek, the Tattooed Man--all of them making their way across the rolling expanse of landscape. Each of them casting peculiar, long shadows over the dirt roads.

Joseph was hiding away. Rarely did he even go out to speak to the other freaks, but maintained silently, brooding in his own coveted space...It was here where he could study the Bible, read his Romances (he had absolutely relished *Emma*) and meditate upon what must be the meaning of his sorry life.

There was one friend upon the road, in a circus where Joseph knew no one, nor spoke the strange smattering of tongues

of the other exhibits. Ferrari kept a constant watch upon him, pacing nervously at the seemingly meager funds Joseph was able to procure by displaying coldly his own repulsive meat.

Joseph's friend was Lucio. Lucio was Italian, but spoke the queens English with only the most minimal accent. Lucio was covered from head to foot with the most impressive, thick hair. Indeed, Joseph noted that he looked quite like some sort of obscure breed of wildlife. But Joseph had liked him, not the least because Lucio was forever procuring him sweet meats and other treats that Ferrari could not or would not provide.

"You never know what might happen to you, Joseph. You might wake up some day, and be somebody else. Sometimes I feel like this is nothing more than a dream. You know, in my country I am *Sanguisuga*: a man-beast; a thing to be feared. But here, in this circus, they respect me, no? Oh, *signore*' , if you could but know the pleasure of being able to just look into a mirror and finally accepting what you see as being that which God has ordained for you. And it is beautiful, Joseph. Can't you see?"

But Joseph could most certainly not see anything except for the wide expanse of beautiful country that stretched around them--and inside his heart he knew the honest pang of hurt that came with knowing that he, of all freaks, was most hideous.

The wagons rattled. Eyes peered forth from behind canvas coverings. Gaily painted images advertised wonders and terrors for anyone willing to pay to see them. Joseph reclined, somewhat, on a mountain of cushions. Lucio began to peel a potato and eat sections of it raw.

"Not many talk to you, eh? Even the other freaks...the midget, Le Grande, he is all puffed-up because he thinks he is a star attraction. Well, let's see the man frighten an audience out of their wits by a simple smile, or a wave of the hand. It is fear that drives them into the circus, Joseph. Fear of the unknown!"

Joseph rarely knew what to say when Lucio went on this way, but instead offered only a few muttered replies. He was never sure the wolf-man could even understand him.

"Eh, you do not speak, *signore*'. It is well, perhaps. By the sacred Mother of God perhaps it would be well for you if you had no mind at all. But...your eyes tell me that that is not so, and I know that you understand Ferrari when he speaks to you. Bah...I hate the man. He doesn't like freaks. He is only after easy money, and so he thinks the showman's life is for him. But any freak knows a good showman from a bad one, and Ferrari is a rotten apple. You will be fortunate if you end this tour with enough money to see you home."

Joseph protested weakly.

"Mr. Ferrari has been very kind..."

But he wasn't sure if Lucio had even heard him right.

"Ah, but let me tell you Joseph, it is good to be a traveling performer, with the wind hitting you in the face, and fame and fortune just waiting for you down a lonely country road. What think you, *signore*'?"

Joseph considered a moment. All these bloody miles, and what did he have to show for it? Bad food, a filthy carriage to sleep in, constant gawking faces and foreign chatter-horseflies and the constant roving eye of policemen, always one step behind them, and always nearly swooping in to shut Ferrari's star attraction away from the eyes of even paying customers.

"I think ", he said slowly, "I am not a performer."

And it was the one thing he said that Lucio clearly understood.

With Carr Gomm

Frederick Treves sat in the Hospital Governor's office, and wished desperately, for a moment, that he had never left Dorset. F.C. Carr Gomm, though an infinitely patient man, was also as hard-headed and practical as Freddy Treves was young and full of ideals. His notions of beauty rested in the same precise arrangements in which one always found an office that could never be accused of being cluttered. In fact, it seemed as empty, as yawning and cavernous, as the mouth of a vacated ward.

"Well, Treves, it seems that our increasingly famous patient has brought quite a lot of financial contribution in from the most unexpected of sources. Our charitable drives have all been highly successful lately, and I have been informed that we can expect just as sizable amounts in the next quarter. Your man has been very good for us, I'm happy to say, you know, that the present situation seems to have been profitable for all parties involved. But tell me, how is the man himself? How is he reacting to all the attention his situation has created?"

Treves considered for a moment. It was almost as if Carr Gum didn't quite realize that Joseph was as imprisoned in Bedstead Square in almost the same way as if he had actually been put under lock and key. Was Carr Gomm so detached that he actually thought that Merrick realized he was fast-becoming a sort of nine-day wonder?

"Yes, well, Mr. Carr Gomm, he is actually, I believe, still under the notion that we mean to see him off somewhere else. That is understandable from the viewpoint of the life which he has led. I try myself to continuously impress upon him the fact that London Hospital is his *home*, and he need not fear any sudden eviction from these premises."

Carr Gomm leaned back in his chair and stroked his sideburn absent-mindedly. Freddy had a very good idea that he was probably thinking about an endless succession of figures related to charitable donations next quarter.

"Yes...well, I shall have to be very careful to keep a continuing notation of where all of the donations are going, how they are spent, and so forth. I mean to see that, while he is here, he is not lacking in anything. London seems to have taken a serious interest in Merrick, and that interest is reflected in the value of care that he receives while he is here. I'm sure you already know that, though. Tell me, would your gentleman be adverse to, well, perhaps, appearing at a private fund-raiser. I mean---not that I would wish to create anything like a *panic*, but he has already been in front of the Pathological Society, and apart from the

scientific interest he generated, it can hardly be said that his appearance there resulted in any serious financial windfall for London Hospital."

Treves sat back in his chair, feeling grave. So, Merrick was to be a tool to win donations, eh? It made Treves recoil. He knew Carr Gomm was *practical*, but not bloody-minded.

"Er, no, Mr. Carr Gomm, I rather believe, as his physician, that it would be to his detriment to expose him again to even a very small crowd of onlookers. He is well on his way to forgetting his particular afflictions. You must yourself admit that, even the most respectable and well-educated of us have a serious difficulty at times comprehending the sight of him. It has been a serious strain with our nurses, but we seem to have found a few hand-picked that have gotten use to him--"

"And you, of course, who are with him most, I take it?"

"Yes-yes. I am with him every day, for a short while, at least."

Carr Gomm looked quizzical for a moment.

"Are you quite certain that that's healthy?"

Treves was slightly startled. He hadn't expected Carr Gomm to change topics so quickly, and he wasn't exactly sure what the question implied.

"What do you mean, sir? I am his physician."

Carr Gomm smiled, and rose suddenly, walking to ward the window and pulling back the sash.

"Freddy, we are colleagues after a fashion. I am full-aware of how a doctor can begin to take a very personal, pressing interest in a patient. And Merrick's case is so special that even the Royals have taken a certain liking to it. I think, to them, he represent some sort of social boil that they can lance with a few presents and a signed photograph or two. But to you, Frederick, he has become a much more serious issue. He is not only your patient, you seem to choose his companionship even when you are not, strictly, speaking, acting as his physician. I wonder: are you preparing yourself, mentally, for the eventuality--"

"Of his demise? Mr. Carr Gomm, I have had patients of mine die before. I am a professional, above all else."

Carr Gomm turned and looked at him.

"Yes, quite right. You are an unsentimental man in that respect. But, you must yourself admit, you are involved with Merrick in such a way that it might put your professional judgment in a precarious state. You are our greatest asset here at London Hospital. I am only concerned, I assure you, for the well-being of all parties involved, and the sanctities of our institution--
_"

Treves sat forward, feeling slightly glum. He knew, in a sort of coldly analytical fashion, that Carr Gom was reproving him for becoming too personally attached to Merrick. He blew air out through his lips.

If only Carr Gom realized how distant he truly was.

Mother

I went to school like other children until I was about 11 or 12 years of age, then the greatest misfortune of my life occurred---namely, the death of my mother. Peace to her. She was a good mother to me.

---Joseph Carey Merrick,
The Autobiography of...

"Yes, Doctor, I believe that it must have been the Workhouse Infirmary. They had a very good doctor there, a Mr. Marriott. He cut away the flesh from my mouth so that I could speak and eat more suitably."

Treves had been busily examining Merrick, taking measurements. He was astonished at how much the head seemed to be growing.

"Yes, well", he said, pulling the tape around Merricks forearm. "He did you a great favor, Joseph. If the oral growth had been allowed to precede without surgery, I very much fear for what the consequences might have been...your condition, I'm sure

you're aware, is not improving."

Merrick was helped by Nurse Ireland back into his shirt and waistcoat. He disliked measurements almost as much as he disliked mirrors, but Freddy insisted that it had to be done. Oh well, he had a new novel to fuss with later, to help clear his mind.

"I see your model cathedral is coming along nicely, Mr. Merrick. It's Saint Phillips, isn't it?" Nurse Ireland busily scratched out the measurements Treves dictated to her on a small pad of paper.

"Oh yes. I rather think it is going to be quite a piece once I finish it. It is a real pleasure for me to be able to craft something so...beautiful. Even if it is only a silly toy."

Treves gave him a bemused look. "Do you really think Saint Phillips is so beautiful, Joseph? I suppose I myself had never given it much thought."

Merrick turned to Nurse Ireland, and said, "Do you see how he is Nurse? He is all work and practicality. Freddy, you must, I fear take some time to enjoy the beauty of things"

"Practicality is my bread and meat. It's how I intend to make my fortune." Treves smiled. "You may go now Nurse Ireland."

"Yes sir. I will be back around to check on you at the end of the shift, Mr. Merrick. I hope you have a pleasant day."

"I hope you have one as well, Nurse Ireland. It is always a pleasure to be cared for by someone that is so committed to her work."

"Oh, Mr. Merrick, you're quite a charmer. You might win a lady's heart someday."

Treves had grimaced at that last comment, but realized it was only a half-jest and said nothing. He would have to remind his nurses again about the sensitivity of his patient to certain subjects. The Nurse hurried out the door

Treves sat at Joseph's work desk, next to his model.

"Well, any new and interesting thoughts? I have a little time to dispose of before I go up to the general wards."

Joseph ambled over to the mantle, and examined some of the ladies photographs he had collected.

"Win the heart of some lady..." he mumbled to himself wistfully.

He turned to Freddy.

"Doctor, do you not think that my mother was one of the most beautiful women? I mean to say, simply look at her picture: the nose is perfect, the cheekbones so slender and angular, the hair is a very shiny, raven-black. Oh, she was simply a jewel to behold."

Treves hated Merrick's mother. He was under the assumption that the foul bitch had cast her seriously ailing son onto the back of a hairdresser Uncle who, eventually, didn't want the burden either. Merrick had simply taken some fantasy concept from one of his novels, and had incorporated it into the vision of charity and selflessness that he wanted to desperately believe his mother had been.

"Yes, well, physical beauty is no great indication of a beautiful character, as you yourself know well, Joseph. I would very much like to have met your mother, though. She seems to have made quite an impression upon you."

Merrick carefully replaced his tiny portrait, and then said, "And how could it have been otherwise? All that I am today is a result of the kindness, the humanity, which she tried so hard to instill in me. Did you know that she herself was lame? Poor thing. But then, it seems to be the curse of my line. Tell me about your mother, Freddy. What is she like?"

Treves had not expected a question thus, but replied "She is a stern woman. And a distant one, too. I suppose I have never really enjoyed her company, as such."

Merrick sat down heavily upon his special chair, and considered.

"It does not surprise me. If you will forgive me for saying so doctor, you do not seem like you would. There is not a lot about you that suggests you are much attached to your parents.

Were they not kind to you?"

Treves never liked being examined too minutely by Merrick, but remained affable.

"They were very supportive, and instilled in me the courage and the aspiration to succeed. Mine was a very normal home. I grew up with some privilege. I knew I wanted to be a doctor, and ordered my life and my education accordingly. It is not much of a childhood story, Joseph. Privilege and good fortune, along with much effort and dedication, have allowed me to be somewhat successful in my chosen avocation."

Merrick considered.

"I wonder, what it would be like, if we could but change shoes for one day? Do you understand? How would I go about the day, looking after people--it might be a very wonderful adventure."

Treves stated flatly, "No one in his right mind would change places with you. I hope you don't mind me saying that, but I don't know how you manage to exist day to day with the mental stability that you do."

"It has not been easy, Freddy. But, I have had to keep, within myself, the knowledge that things seem to constantly re-order themselves in the proper fashion. In one small way, I do consider myself to be a lucky man."

"Really? How so?"

"I had the most wonderful mother a man could ever ask for."

Treves considered for a moment---*he's really built this into a spectacular fantasy. It's the one point upon which he is a little unreasonable. Surely, after all the trouble the woman caused him, he must bear some type of ill-will or anger toward her?*

"Joseph," he began carefully, "I was under the assumption that your mother had, well, *cast you off* when you got to be a burden to the family."

Merrick turned slowly and looked at the doctor.

"*Step*mother, Freddy. That was Mrs. Antill. When Mother

died, Father went to lodgings, and he married the landlady. She didn't like me. Nor, did her two sons. That was when I went to live with Uncle Charlie."

"Oh. Yes. Well, now it is clear. And from there it was Leicester Union, correct?"

"Correct."

"And, you were there four years, before you met Sam Torr, and--*what was the gentleman's name?*"

"Tommy. Old Tommy Norman. He once told me that Barnum himself had given him the name 'Silver King', because Tommy always wore a bunch of coins on his watchband. He was a good sort."

Treves couldn't have disagreed more, but said, "Yes. I...suppose he was. Still, don't you feel that gentlemen like Mr. Torr and Mr. Norman, well, perhaps were more concerned with their own business dealings than with your personal welfare? I mean to say, your run as a freak shop attraction didn't end very well."

Merrick sat down, and wished for a cup of tea.

"Actually, it ended very well, from where I'm sitting. You must admit, Freddy, if it hadn't been for all of that, I wouldn't be here with you having this little chat. I would not, probably, have lived for you to sit there and wonder how it is I can always be so forgiving to everyone. Do you know what the workhouse is like, Doctor? They kill you there, slowly, so they don't have to deal with you. But first, they make sure you're being productive to society. A few years on the fairground was a small price to pay for finally coming to The London. I am a product of His grace."

Well, Treves had to admit, his friend had an odd way of reasoning. Everything happened according to God's will. So why ever have a disparaging word to say about anyone?

"I do not believe in letting our troubles overwhelm us, my friend. But still, I wonder if, inside your spirit, you do not feel a grievous and righteous anger against those that have so ill-used you in life. Perhaps, your faculty of judgment is wanting. Joseph,

to be blunt, gentleman like Torr and Tom Norman are no better than back-alley pimps. They peddled your flesh for profit, and when they found out that you were no longer of any use to them, they cast you off onto the shoulders of another manager, who couldn't handle the burden either. You are immensely lucky that we here at The London are more than prepared to care for you."

Merrick considered, reaching absently for his walking stick, and beating a rhythm on the floor with the end.

"Yes, you may be right. But I so *liked* the Silver King."

With Anne

"Freddy, dear, we simply must holiday in Scotland. I have read in the *Ladies' Journal* that all of the most fashionable people are holidaying in Scotland this season."

Freddy Treves sat in his leather chair and looked at the fire rapidly growing in the grate. So? Holiday in Scotland was what she wanted, eh? Well, perhaps.

"I do not believe that I can afford to take the time off. You know how incredibly busy I have been recently."

She moaned, "Oh, poor dear, I know, you simply *insist* on working yourself to death. Freddy, has it not occurred to you that there will still be sick people to tend when you return?"

He felt like hissing. She had no conception of the responsibilities that burdened him. He felt as much like holidaying in Scotland as he felt like driving nails into his forehead. He should have stayed at the Club longer, this evening.

"Yes," he said sadly. "I don't suppose they ever vanish altogether. I can't cure them all at any rate. Merrick, well--him I can only house and coddle."

She giggled, rising from her chair and going to the fireplace. She was wondering, deep inside, what secrets he had been keeping from her lately. He had been so late in coming home, so tired, so unlike the Freddy she had married...it was as if there was dark cloud floating upon his being, something that colored everything that they were together. She had put it to

exhaustion.

"You simply refuse to enjoy any of the success of your labor, don't you Fred? It's as if you're still struggling in Derbyshire. Well, we aren't struggling anymore, but you can't stop."

He considered. She was right. He was upset for no discernable reason, but the joy had been sucked out of him to such an extent that he could barely lift a smile sometimes. He looked at her.

She was still beautiful. The warm glow of the firelight seemed to erase the years they had spent together, erase the cold freeze that had been put upon sex since the girls were born. Her dress was now more ornate, more of the stifling constriction of the West End lady than the more humble attire of shopkeeper's daughter. She seemed to be something he couldn't touch anymore, couldn't seem to relate to in the same way.

Perhaps it was inevitable. Love died, like a man with a terminal illness. You couldn't expect the vows of matrimony to keep the flame of passion smoldering. Finally, all that was left were the ashes, dressed in a fashionable manner and completely oblivious to the reality setting in around them.

"It is not as if I feel that I must strain. It is simply that I have taken an oath. Do you understand, that a man such as me has very specialized knowledge, knowledge that can aid the suffering, and prevent death in cases when death seems almost certain? That is a heavy responsibility to bear, Anne. I do not do so lightly."

She turned, and he could see that he had angered her.

He felt grim, suddenly. He was not in the mood for any difficulty this evening. The day had been incredibly exhausting in its own right, and now the evening promised to be insufferable.

"And what of your responsibility to me? What about your duty as husband and father? Are these secondary now? Because, if that is the case, husband, then do not expect me to be overly concerned with anything that is not of the most inconsequential

nature. It may seem to you as if I revel in frivolities, but I assure you I do it only as a means of escape from the cage you have built for me. I am like a pet bird, left to sing a gay song, and be ultimately ignored. So."

She turned again, and adjusted a few photographs upon the mantle.

He sat and stared into the crackling grate. Outside, the world was cold, but inside it seemed as if a far greater coldness was threatening to freeze him and his wife for an indeterminate period, at which point it would be left up to fate to decide, if ever it did decide, ultimately, if either of them should ever begin to thaw.

"I promise, Anne--"

He stopped. For, what could he promise?

The wind outside began to moan, and did not stop the whole of the long, dark night.

Old Friends

It is an easy thing to talk of patience to the afflicted,
To speak the laws of prudence to the houseless wanderer...

---William Blake,
The Four Zoas

"Have you ever considered that, perhaps, *in some way*, you are luckier than the average man, Joseph? I mean to say, woman can be a terrible burden for a man to bear."

Joseph looked at Treves with his one good eye, and could have pounded him square on the head. It was all well and good for Freddy to say such a thing...

"I would gladly--if I could--bear such a burden."

"I wonder if you would, Joseph. For instance, my own wife

is subject to the most insufferable agitations at times...her hysterics can become quite unnerving. If she feels something in the household is out of order, or does not seem as if it would impress anyone that might come calling, well---she can be an insufferable woman. All women can be insufferable...all women."

"Better to be henpecked, I say...Freddy, I will never, in all my life, know what it is like to be henpecked by a wife. No woman has ever touched me. I don't even like to think about it." Merrick looked involuntarily grief stricken, for a moment. Treves felt his patience slip.

"No, I don't suppose you do. Still, you have the nursing staff here. Have you stopped to consider how acclimated they have become to your appearance since you have come to stay with us? You can scarcely complain about your daily bathing ritual...There are some men that haven't even that particular luxury to speak of." Treves stood, paced somewhat in the gloom around his friend, and then sat down heavily on one of the hard wooden chairs. There had been the slightest tremor of a smirk in his voice when he had said the words *bathing ritual*, of course insinuating that Joseph must be thoroughly pleased by the sensation of having even a female dray horse like Hildy Watkins touch him. Outside, Bedstead Square and the hospital gardens fell into the silent gloom of the late night hours, when Joseph was free to walk about unencumbered and unseen.

Treves had no idea why he had decided to stay so late with Merrick--perhaps, he somehow preferred the company of a fellow traveler in obsession to the cold automata of his own family. Lately, he had begun to resent their ceaseless taking from him--there demands that he felt that he must acquiesce too. It was so much bloody nonsense--he felt as if, sometimes, they represented some sort of foul parasite that was clinging to his being.

"Joseph, "he began, "we are really more comparable than what you might think--each of us, in his own way, is infatuated with the flesh. You are frustrated by your own skin; tormented really. You cannot escape it--"

"Freddy, what are you driving at?"

"Oh, I don't know. Peculiar...Do you know how frustrating it is be unable to piece together a body that is ailing? To cut and explore, to work elbow deep in guts and to still, fundamentally, be of no service to a man that God has, seemingly, destined to die. Doctors are a curious breed, Joseph: we seek to end the suffering of man, in fact, are bound by solemn oath to do so. Yet our entire livelihood is based upon the one unalterable fact that, no matter what we do, man will always suffer, and sicken, and die. It's a pity, sometimes I feel like the basest hypocrite."

Merrick could scarcely understand what he was hearing, and had no ready reply. He looked with his one useable eye at Trees, who sat alone, and solemn, in his basement rooms at nearly one o'clock...when he could have been at home with a wife that (Joseph had to admit guiltily) was one of the most *alluring* he had yet met in this, his new life. What in the hell was bothering the man?

There is something wrong here, but I cannot, for the world, fathom what. How could a man like Freddy be so unhappy with his station in life? It buggers reason.

Joseph felt a cold spark of jealous indignation. To hell with Trees, if he could not appreciate exactly what it was he had been blessed with. He would trade with him, gladly, for the privilege that Treves was taking for granted. The privilege to take a woman by the hand, call her wife, and sit by the fireplace with the children, singing at Yuletide or drinking wine.

"Are you quite alright, Freddy? Perhaps you would be happier living in a basement room in a hospital?"

Joseph had coughed what amounted to sarcastic laughter, but Treves suddenly did something so unexpected as to actually make Joseph, for the first time in almost two years, feel the tight watery fear that gripped his stomach when he knew that some normal man was perilously close to striking him.

"*Damn you. Goddamn you, Merrick*", Treves had hissed, his countenance suddenly undergoing a twitching conversion. His

face had turned, quite abruptly, from the milk-white, placid, face of a gentleman doctor to something that Merrick had never seen it become as long as he had known him. It was a bloody, scarlet color, an almost purple shade of red that lent it the appalling look of a man ready to succumb through exertion. Merrick was too much in shock to concentrate very hard upon the next words that were launched at him.

"Do you think you are the only one that suffers in the world? Do you? Damn you--of course you do! Do you think the rest of us are not afflicted in some way? You poor beaten dog of a man. Learn that this world is ruthless to everyone, everyone suffers, the bloody Princess suffers, I suffer--you have no right to suggest that I don't."

Treves seemed to have burnt his anger out of him just as quickly as it had flared up in him. He suddenly crumpled back in his chair, and couldn't look anywhere but the shadows that collected in the corner of the room. He was trapped.

He *was* trapped. Now, he would have to, somehow, restore the seriously fractured relationship between Merrick and himself; there was no helping it, he would be confined here until he could-

Slip on the same mask? The grace-filled mask of a philanthropist, a healer, a vast intellect well-educated and well-adapted to his surroundings? Merrick has to believe that. I have to be able to restore that basic faith in me that he has always had...for his own survival. What in Gods name is wrong with me, that I should have erupted into such anger? At Merrick?

"I-Im, Joseph..."

But Merrick continued to stare at him, with a look of profound awe playing in his eyes. It was as if, in this natural state, Treves became something which was not only unpleasant in its manifestation of absolute rage, but something, altogether, wholly remarkable.

"Do not say anything, Treves." Joseph flicked spittle to his lips, a gesture that was so utterly debased and revolting Treves almost felt, for one white-hot moment, like getting up and killing

the man. Suddenly, every bit of sympathy he had ever had for Merrick had seemed to disappear down the deep hole that seemed to be steadily eating away at his sanity.

It was instantly very damned hot in that room. Hot and cramped and dark. Treves felt like his heart was beating away all of his energy, as if he could feel it pump the oxygen from his head and blood.

"Treves, I think you don't know me very well at all. I think, perhaps, you should really know me. Do you suppose that Leicester workhouse was cruel only to my own gross body? Do you suppose that the tears that I cried there were only for myself? How dare you. Never insinuate, Freddy, that I am anything less than concerned with human suffering. I am not a beast, an elephant, or anything of the sort. I...am a gentleman. And I am also a Christian."

Now it was Treves' turn to be astonished. He had expected Merrick to cower and shrink when spat upon verbally. Instead, here was a cool, courageous Merrick that seemed ready to eat up the world with the gaze of his one eye.

"Yes well, I-I-hope that. Um, well, you see, Joseph, it has simply been an incredible tax to my nerves. And, well, there are situations that *drive* me, that do not drive you..."

Merrick continued with the silence that bespoke his shock and disappointment. It seemed to be eating up Treves conception of his personal being. Treves felt the urge to shrink into a puddle.

"Well, damn it man, I hope that you can forgive your God, because Joseph I cannot. Cannot forgive him..." Treves felt almost as if he were going to weep.

I have ruined it all! I have destroyed the doctor-patient relationship I have tried so hard to build with him...all the trust, all gone ruined. This will never heal, and I shall be ashamed to show my face to him again.

"You should really read *Job*, Doctor. I think it quite suits you." Merrick clung to the argument, nearly amused at the depth to which an angry outburst could draw their conversation.

"Does it, Joseph? I find your impertinence...well, what can I

expect? I have been a monster tonight myself..." Treves fell off dismally.

"I know all about monsters, Freddy."

"Not as much as you think, Merrick. Nevertheless, I must offer you my deepest apologies. I have offended..."

"No--merely surprised. How could anyone offend me? Look at me, and ask yourself that question. Then ask yourself this: who cares more about the suffering of the world than its monsters? You claim me to be indifferent to all but my own suffering, but how could I truly know what the suffering of a--oh, I hate the word--*normal* man, was like? I can only suffer from my own perspective. And from my own perspective, be shocked at the self-created torments of someone like you."

Treves thought, *a bloody saint. That is what he thinks he is. Only Merrick would have this discussion with me.*

"I suppose you can forgive God, can't you? You are his chief spokesperson, Joseph. A living testament to the power of prayer," Treves laughed, bitterly. "You're assured an eternal resting place, and we-we-" Treves stopped himself, but Merrick knew exactly what his next words would be.

"You are going to make my last years comfortable, until I get to heaven, true Doctor? That is what you were going to say, wasn't it?"

Treves had risen and was pacing a bit. He suddenly looked at Joseph with new eyes; eyes that held foreknowledge that the deformed visage that hunkered before them on an old hospital sofa, was not long for the world of living men. Suddenly, he knew no anger, no dissatisfaction, no deep longing to cleanse and purify and cut away the rot of the world, to show God one better...now he felt only deep grief; for Merrick, for the whole of the wicked world outside, that knew poverty, and vice and despair...and also, a jealous grief for himself. Because, despite what he had managed to attain in just a little over thirty years, he was deeply, dreadfully sure of one thing..

He was not who he wanted to be.

Merrick rose, with much difficulty, and shuffled toward Treves where he sat in the gloom. He thought he could see tears, faintly dot the Doctors cheeks.

Old friend, why did you come here tonight?

"Freddy..."

Joseph put his delicate hand to Treves shoulder, but could not say anything.

"I-I must go. I am exhausted. Joseph...could we never speak of this again? About any of this?"

Old friend...

Joseph, Reading

There were some fanciful poems he wanted to go through today, but he re-read an obligatory verse or two from the Bible, as he was always loath to start a day without doing so. He had just opened at *Ecclesiastes*, but could not keep his mind on it. He opted instead for *Job* a book whose intimacy to himself had guided him through the most perilous times of his being.

Old Job, his children dead, his neighbor come to taunt, terrible sores having broken out all over his being. It was almost like a meditation on the value of suffering.

Merrick had often wondered why God's hand had allowed his particular disease to progress to the point where others found him to be hideous. Was there some sort of secret battle going on, he wondered, between God and the Adversary, to test the value of his own faith?

He read, aloud: "'There was a man in the land of Uz, named Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared god, and eschewed evil...' Yes, that is certainly me. All the days of my life I have done nothing but try to keep myself very far from evil. Yet evil always dogs my heels."

He suddenly realized that he was simply talking to himself. Oh, well, he knew that he was not "perfect, and upright", not by

any stretch of the imagination. Nevertheless, had not he always tried to be an example of Christian living? Even when the street children ran after him, mocking his large head and distorted face, wasn't it always the love of Christ he had tried to keep in his heart, as an anodyne for the anger and the shame that they put him through? Maybe he was being too self-righteous.

"Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them. And the Lord said unto Satan, Whence comest thou?' He stopped for a moment, envisioning the gathering of angels upon the cloud, letting his imagination take him to a strange, new place. It was always heartening to sit down with the Bible, when he wanted to escape. Or, well, any book, for that matter. The written word was a love to him.

He read on, envisioning the sore-begot Job lying prostrate upon the ground beneath a tree. *Well, figured Joseph, there is no denying it; I have known exactly how he is feeling before, myself. Perhaps God tests the best of us. I hope that is the case.*

He knew, logically, that he had done nothing to offend God. Freddy always told him it was science that held the key to his bodily torment. Well, Freddy was as astray upon the path as it was possible to be, even though he was a good friend. Joseph knew it to be true. Shame.

Science. The word had a hissing quality that he found unnerving. He fancied that if he could get a hold of science as a real, breathing entity, in the flesh, he might have a word or two with him. However, alas, he also understood that science was an abstract concept--a monumental--chimera, and could not be got a hold of and made to answer for its shortcomings.

He put his Bible down and went over to his wardrobe. There was only one antidote for boredom, these days, and that was to sit, for a little while, and make his way through *Frankenstein*. He was now a great lover of the novel, having totally disregarded Treves admonition to throw it away as "unhealthy". Unhealthy, be damned! The thing was sensational. He found himself going over

passages he had already read, simply for the pleasure of their prose.

It seemed as if *Frankenstein* spoke his language--the language of deformity, the language of ugliness, the language of a soul that, refused refuge in the warm bosom of humankind, was crying out to its creator for some sense of comfort or understanding. Moreover, did that soul ever receive an answer?

The Midnight Visitor

[...]it was declared by the nurse, and by some sage woman in the neighborhood who had taken a lively interest in me several months before the possibility of our becoming personally acquainted, first, that I was destined to be unlucky in life; and secondly, that I was privileged to see ghosts and spirits...

---Charles Dickens,
David Copperfield

Joseph Merrick was asleep...

He had been asleep in his bed, when the shadow had begun to steal across the face of the little room. He could still hear the rain patter against the window, still feel the oppressive mood that Treves' visit had stirred hang in the musty air. Beside him, the shadow appeared; globular, indistinct--but slowly taking form.

It resolved itself into a man: a man with a tall stovepipe hat and a short cloak. However, it was still a shadow--no features were discernable, or at least, they seemed barely discernable. It was as if the damned thing carried it is darkness around its shoulders, and molded itself into it tightly.

It motioned for him. Joseph peeped above his knee, but he knew that he had little choice, except to follow. This had happened before.

"Where are we disappearing this time?" Joseph asked. He almost liked this dream. At least in this dream he required no cane to walk. He simply seemed to glide along, unencumbered, as if his

spine was straight and his hip had never been injured.

He followed the Shadow, going out through the entrance and out into the garden. Beyond, he could see a kind of faint mist playing about the earth, and the Shadow turned briefly, to implore him to hurry. Which was ridiculous, because it was quite beyond Joseph's power to do? The night was a silent cathedral; there was not even the wailing of a drunken woman to pierce the stillness that seemed to enwrap him and his strange visitor.

"Where are we going, Mr. *Whatever-you-are*?"

"There is time to explain later," said the Shadow. "Now is not a time for explanations. Now is the time for travel. You should concentrate on one task and one task only. This is the path to inner peace."

Joseph glided through thorny bushes and shrubs, yet they did not hurt him. Outside, he could even see a little of the sky through the interminable rooftops and piping chimneys. It had never looked so utterly unearthly.

"Where are we going?" he kept asking, but received no reply this time.

Suddenly, they were upon a dark, country lane going quickly down into greater darkness. The Shadow still cut a menacing outline, blacker than the black around him.

"Do you know where we are, Joseph?"

Merrick felt the question absurd.

"No, of course not. I do not know even who you are, or what. Are you from God, or are you a trick of the Adversary? I know that this is no dream."

The Shadow stopped suddenly, and looked at him. Now, Joseph could begin to see the suggestion of eyes, lit by some inner luminescence that suggested the Shadow might be wearing a mask.

"I am that, which you might call, the middle stage between spirit and flesh. I have brought you here to show you a great thing. However, you are here is spirit with me. Your flesh is still asleep."

Merrick was surprised. Therefore, this *was* a dream. Well, no danger then...

"I suppose," He said slowly, "that in a moment or two you will dissolve, and soon I will be dreaming about old Tommy at the bally platform, and about the look of shock on a crowd of faces. On the other hand, maybe I will dream a part of *Frankenstein*. Maybe I will dream of seeing Hildy Watkins lay out before me, as naked as the day she was born. This has become tiresome routine."

The Shadow gave him no response, but simply held out one immensely long arm and said, "Observe."

There was a small wood at the side of the road, but suddenly it seemed to shift, to open up a doorway into it, and a light began to creep forth. Merrick was astonished. Still, this did not seem to be a dream.

Within the wood was a tiny room; a child's room, and bent over a cradle was the figure of a small woman. She seemed silent, forlorn; Merrick fancied he could see tears spill down her cheeks, quietly. He wondered if this was a vision of the Blessed Virgin.

He felt a pang of emotion that was inexplicable, full of fear and wonder and pain. He realized who the woman was. It was his dear mother Mary.

"Why?", he asked, his voice croaking with grief. "Why do you torment me, Shadow?"

The woman was crying over the crib, but Merrick understood that it was not him she was crying over, but his brother William, who had died of fever.

Oh mother, but to touch your blessed face again would burn my hand. How I have longed to hold you in my arms one last time.

He moved forward, unable to control himself. However, it was as if some invisible hand stilled him. The Shadow turned back.

"This is but one thing that I can show you, in a limitless number of things. Here there is no time. Here there is no distance, and no death. Observe--"

The Shadow turned again, and held up his arm in exactly the same manner. The scene faded instantly, and another began to emerge. Merrick saw his mother again, hobbling, with her old wicker cane, toward a ugly, lump of a small boy that he realized must be himself. In the corner of the room, his little sister sat, rubbing tears from her swollen eyes with tiny hands. He understood; they were going to William's funeral.

"Take it away, away. I don't want to see anymore."

The scene began to fade, slowly. The Shadow said, "There is one more illusion to bear, my friend. I am one who travels between the planes to bring tidings of that which is to be. Observe---"

Moreover, he turned and held out his arm again, in precisely the same manner, and the little darkened woods began to shift once more. Now, they were a familiar sitting room in a beautiful house that Merrick knew was in Wimpole Street. He had been there once before, met Anne Treves, and had tea with the couple while the children were away at school. Anne had been very kind, and beautiful--but he had not, really, liked her. It seemed that she was tolerating his presence in deference to her husband.

Anne had been sitting by herself, weeping silently, waiting her husband's return. She seemed, for a moment, like the loneliest figure in the world, and his heart went out to her. He had not realized such turmoil had been brewing in the marriage, and it suddenly worried him. Then, the front door rattled open, and a man entered. It was Freddy--but it was not. In a way, that Joseph could not quite put his finger on, the image of the man that strode through the parlor and into his wife's embrace seemed to bear the image of Treves, but he knew it was not actually him.

She turned from him, and went to the mantle, her weeping become more intense with effort. Behind her, he held out his arms as if to entreat her to come to him, but it was to no avail. Joseph wondered, perhaps, if Freddy had taken a mistress, or something.

Anne Treves looked, for the world, to be the picture of the grief-stricken wife who was losing a grip on her marriage. Freddy simply walked across the room to his study and closed the door. The scene faded.

"Why show me this? Is there some ultimate purpose for your bringing me to this dark place? It is so cold here."

The Shadow turned to him again, and said, "There is a reason for everything that happens. Know that I show you this, to demonstrate to you that my knowledge of all that transpires, on heaven and earth, is perfect. This place is a place between. One day, we will meet in the place where there is no darkness. Now, you must go."

He was pointed forward, and told to proceed down the road they had been traveling. Little by little, that pathway began to disappear, and the limbs of the overhanging trees that nearly touched across the roadway, became, in the way that they do in dreams, the rocky apex of some subterranean passage.

The ground beneath him was rough, but he seemed to not even notice, and there was no discomfort. He moved easily, almost as if he were submerged in a pond to his neck, and simply had to tiptoe the bottom of it to move forward. Ahead of him, a strange, misty light resolved itself into some sort of doorway. There seemed to be, almost, a blanket of thick smoke covering the front of it, as if a curtain of cloudiness would have to be passed through to get to the other side.

The smoke shifted and danced, coalescing into a variety of strange shapes that seemed almost human in form, shapes that seemed to be drifting upward and reaching out, wriggling within their smoky imprisonment.

I can never tell anyone about this delusion. No one would believe the particulars, and how could I possibly explain it anyway?

Finally, he was facing the wall of smoke. He heard a voice, like a mighty rumbling shout his name, and realized this was, quite possibly, the voice of God.

"Move forward! The gate is open, and the clocks are

ticking!"

Music seemed to follow him out, a strange, wild atonal music like he had never heard before. He thought it blasting of angelic trumpets, but it seemed even more bizarre than that. As he walked into the smoke, it began to clear, and he saw that he was, once again back in a familiar world of East London. He turned, and gasped.

A huge column of smoke was wafting from the side of a perfectly normal building. It retained the same shape as the doorway from which he had just passed...But the most uncommon thing were the tall, *freakishly tall*, beings that stood to each side.

There faces were like wet earth, having only the merest suggestion of facial appearance. The heads were great, and bald. However, it was the *eyes*, the large eyes that seemed to literally burn like twin tongues of fire, that seemed to draw you into a vision of wrath and final judgment that made Joseph's heart quiver. They wore long, white gowns, and each carried a sword that was like a tongue of flame. One of the beings pointed it's sword at him.

"Never return to this doorway. It is being guarded, and though you have passed out of it, you may no longer enter. And if you do, you stand in danger of hellfire." Its voice was a sweet melody, like the voice of a child, but Joseph knew its words were deadly serious.

Suddenly, they stepped backward, without turning, and seemed to be carried into the smoke. Then, the gate closed; the column of smoke was sucked inward rapidly, until all that was left was a mere wisp dancing off the faded bricks of a filthy alley wall.

Merrick was unsure of, exactly, where he was. However, the sun had not yet fully climbed upward, and he realized in trepidation that he was not wearing his outdoor garb. He walked out into the street, and had the misfortune to amble into a pathetic old woman who was sitting at the curb, singing to herself drunkenly.

"...Brother an' sister, they lay beneath the clay! Oh, 'twere only a violet from mothers' grave!"

He froze in terror, as she turned her head at the sound of his footsteps. He knew he would hear her piercing wail, and it would necessitate a hasty get away. However, in his amazement, she looked right at him and registered no response. It was as if he had not been standing only a foot or two away.

"Blimey! Ghosts wot it is!"

And she took another stiff drink, rose, and went away quickly. Merrick soon realized the beauty of his particular situation. At last, he was to be able to fulfill a life-long dream: he could go about the streets unseen.

The Secret Lodge

Then rose the Builders.

First the Architect divine his plan, Unfolds.

The wondrous scaffold reared all round the infinite,

Trigons and cubes divide the elements in finite bonds.

Multitudes work incessant: the hewn stone,

Is plac'd in beds of mortar mingled with the ashes of Vala.

Severe the labor; female slaves the mortar trod oppressed.

---William Blake,

The Four Zoas

There was a world beyond that none of them could see, but he had seen it: in nightmare visions that called his name during the periods between dreaming and wakefulness. He had been shown things that their trifling minds could not conceive of. Eternal dark--beautiful unrelenting night.

He had been initiated into the Secret Mysteries.

It had little to do, finally, with their "secret brotherhood". He had joined that simply to better his situation from a career angle. It had seemed like so much pretentious nonsense, at first. Moreover, in truth, much of it was simply that: a charade.

Nevertheless, the angles of the compass, and the eternal

mystery of *Jah-Bul-On*. Now that had been a tree that had bore terrific fruit.

Lestrade had been a brother Mason. Together, after the Lodge meeting, they would often accompany one another to dinner.

"So," he asked him upon one occasion. "Are you content with what you have learned?"

He looked up from his plate, curiously.

"Of course. How could it be otherwise?" Then, suspiciously: "What are you driving at, Lestrade?"

Lestrade smiled a gesture that made his long, rawboned face look almost comically ugly.

"I mean, do you really want to experience a total revelation? Do you hunger for something more than what you have been introduced to at the Lodge meetings?"

He put his fork down, and casually picked up his wine, doffing it in one swallow.

"What more is there, Brother?"

"Let's just say, for the sake of argument, that I *know* of something more. Would you be willing to trust me?"

He pulled a cigarette and lit it. He did not trust Lestrade at all, really. However, he was too curious to say no.

"What do you have in mind, old boy?"

"How would you like to learn the real secrets of the cosmos? How would you like to be initiated into the Mysteries of *He Who Cannot Be Named*?" Lestrade had smiled, tolerantly, at his ignorance.

He stopped for a moment, unsure of what to say.

"Why not?" is what he finally said.

The first ritual, when he had finally managed to penetrate the veil of the mystery, was like succor to his soul. Imagine if you will, a blind man that had suddenly been given the faculty of sight.

Lestrade had introduced him to the Secret Order, the divine

Inner Circle that met at odd hours in various and sundry places to plumb the arcana of old, to push through the veil of the cosmos until they managed to restore the godhead and return to the Original State of Grace. It had been enacted in a basement of an abandoned house out on the moors, and he had been brought there suddenly.

He had simply been waking up from an afternoon nap, when suddenly he realized there were a number of black robed men gathered about him in his bedroom. He did not dare to cry out, and soon they had him gagged and blindfolded, and hustled out the backdoor of his own home and into a waiting carriage. They had picked an appropriate time, he surmised later. His wife and children had left for a short holiday in the country.

Then, it was a blindfolded ride in the back of a carriage, with a blade pointed at his throat, and a gun aimed at his side.

"Don't speak," one of his captors said. "Don't say a fockin' word."

In truth, since they had already gagged him, it should not have concerned them very much. He did not even dare to squeal a protest.

There had been seven gathered in a space, lit entirely by black candles, and each hooded member wore a grinning mask, one-half of which was colored black. He recognized Lestrade though; whose mask had an immense pointed nose, as well. Moreover, there were no mistaking Lestrade's supremely arrogant tones.

The house had previously been used as a mortuary. There, they had stood, while he lay in a pine coffin supported by two massive bricks, naked--and they had asked him questions, which he had but no choice to answer.

"Have you ever felt sexual desire for your mother?" Lestrade's voice shot out from the darkness, but he could not see any of their faces, for they were all hooded and masked.

"Yes," he admitted, unashamedly. It was going to take so

much revelation and truth for him to finally be able to attain the Path.

"Have you ever had sex with your mother?"

"No."

"Have you ever committed a sexual act with a member of your own family?"

"No."

"Have you ever committed a sexual act with a member of the same sex?"

Pause.

"Yes." He could feel the icy cold of the room upon his naked skin. His head was throbbing.

"Are you a thief?"

"No."

"Are you a liar?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever committed a serious crime?"

"No."

"Have you ever taken a human life?"

Pause.

They had then shut the coffin, and he could feel himself being lifted. He felt the first sharp pang of dread strike his heart, and suddenly he was wild with the urge to get out. To break free from his premature interment.

However, he knew, he was not supposed to show any emotions.

He could hear the voice of Lestrade, somewhere in the darkness, and he could then hear hammering on the lid of the coffin.

Ohmigod! They are not going to actually do it are they?

Suddenly, he could feel sharp nails being driven through the cheap pine box, cutting into him, and he knew that he was now bleeding. Then, just as suddenly, it stopped, and he could hear the

singing; faintly, muffled, but growing stronger.

Finally, there was silence for a moment, and then he could feel his weight being lifted. Apparently, they were carrying the coffin *somewhere* in the darkened cellar.

Nevertheless, they will not really do it! This is all symbolic...soon, they will pry up the lid, and I will be reborn as a new creature, made whole finally, for the first time in my life, and imbued with a magnificent purpose.

Then he felt them lower the box, deep. He knew they were using ropes.

He could hear the thump of the dirt against the lid. He began to scratch the lid, but the chanting had resumed, and he could hear Lestrade above him, invoking the names of strange gods in Enoch, the magical language of all black magicians. Still, despite the terror that now gripped his heart like some animal claw, despite the suffocating heat of the box, and the knowledge that they could simply bury him there, in an abandoned house, and let him die, he maintained his stoic silence.

Finally, he knew he must be completely covered with earth. A terrible stinging insect was at his neck, but he did not even notice.

How much oxygen did he have left? He must try to control his breathing.

After two minutes, he began to scabble at the lid in terror.

Three minutes...

Four...

Suddenly, in the darkness, he saw a doorway open before him. It was golden, the color of the sun, and he knew that he must walk through it, from death to eternal life, and back to death again. This was the only way.

Now he was standing before the golden gateway to strange worlds undreamt of. Before him, an angel with a fiery sword stood, massively, guarding the eternal mysteries of which man has no right to partake.

"You are an interloper in this affair. We do not recognize you. Go back beyond the way. The gate is open, the clocks are ticking." The voice of the angel was a sweet, child-like melody; but its words seemed like tongues of arctic flame. He could feel his soul nauseate and cringe, as they were spake.

He saw then the true face of the seraph: the face of the eternal spark of Divine Truth that nestled within its burning breastplate. A hideous, amorphous shape seemed to grow, mutate, and collapse into itself. A chaos that seemed to contain in its primordial struggle for actualization all the possible forms of organic life, and none of them. It oozed, it writhed, it grew tentacles, and fingers, and arms, and heads.

His simple mind shattered at the realization of what he was witnessing; it was too much to assimilate into the fabric of his consciousness. He lay down upon the rocky pathway that led to Heaven and Hell, and refused to move.

"No," said the Angel. "You must not stop here. There is no resting upon the path. All energies must flow in both directions. This is the eternal cycle of all things."

"What is this place?" he asked the angel.

There were no features on the face, only burning eyes, but he could hear that terrifying voice from inside and outside, all around him.

"It is heaven in here, and we have all of eternity. Now, you must return to complete the cycle. Otherwise, the balance will not be corrected. These are mysteries that even the angels dare not plume."

A rumble from far off seemed to thunder his voice. Behind him, away from the Golden Door, lay an eldritch darkness that he felt was beyond his meager comprehension. Nevertheless, just as suddenly, he knew it was where he belonged. He turned, leaving the Angel to stand guard at the gateway, and began to walk into the darkness, knowing that that was where his soul truly belonged.

He now had knowledge, which he had never possessed before. The First Truth, he would come to call it. There was no

free will; his destiny had been written before his great-great granddame had even been born. It was in the stars, in the sacred books of truth, and written in the exact position of a bloody thigh lying in Mitre Square, in London, in the world of living men.

He began to run toward that darkness, and soon he was falling.

Soon, the mouth of the passageway began to grow wider and wider, until he was simply plunging in a bottomless rift in which there was no more light.

He had no recollection of what happened after that, but he remembered awakening several days later in a kind of bizarre fugue. They had surrounded him, but Lestrade had sent them away and merely stood guard by him till at last he was ready to tell.

"Well," asked Lestrade. "What do you have to tell me, Brother? Do you now feel ready to begin your training in the Sacred Art and the Forbidden Truth?"

He looked at Lestrade, and then raised his arm from the bed.

"Yes," he said weakly. "I have seen the other side."

"Yes...and what did you learn?"

Suddenly he grabbed the man's throat, and began to squeeze the windpipe closed. Lestrade fought, in vain. Soon, he was out of bed, and standing.

"They want you there, Lestrade. Its heaven, you see...and they have all of eternity."

At his feet, Lestrade lay curled. He was no longer breathing.

Saucy Jack

I will soon get my doss house money. See what a jolly bonnet I've got now?

---Polly Nichols

He had killed the first one in Buck's Row, in Hanbury St. It

had been a tasty job. It had been outside of the Frying Pan where he had first spotted her. He had made no move immediately, but simply had followed at a close distance, making sure to always blend back into the darkness, into the wall. It was not as if he was actually worried that she would catch on to his pursuit. She was too drunk to ever notice much of anything around her.

It had taken a steadily mounting fire within to convince him that he was the Angel of Death. In Hebrew legend, he knew that his name was *Azrael*. Now, he had so many warring voices in his head, it simply made no difference. Here, he was simply *Bloody Knife*.

He never knew their names until the *Police News* made careful report of it later. He did not even understand them as proper persons...only as walking boils to be lanced. They were verminous, all of the East End was verminous and goddamnit he meant to drive the rats out of Hamlin.

So many squalid little tenements, public houses, dance halls, and tiny shops presided over by beady eyed little Jews...it brought him such a feeling of vast, engulfing fury he felt as if he could spit fire at all of them, wiping them clean in one blast of judgment; making Sodom burn with the embers of holy indignation.

Polly, he thought as he sat in his upstairs lodging, staring off into space. The first one had been named Polly. Well, she had been a gross, lewd creature...haggard and repulsive, and to think that some low men were willing to actually pay her money for sex. It was enough to make him feel queasy.

He had approached her as a gentleman, wearing the convenient disguise he had managed to piece together for himself. Normally he was quite pale, the hallmark of any man who worked long hours hidden away in an office. However, he had obtained a sort of make-up from a mortician in his acquaintance-- and when he spread it around his face and hands he looked, by the description in the papers, like a "foreign gentleman".

He had to laugh at that one. Gave him real fits.

No Englishman would do such a thing surely.

It was August 31st. It had been a Friday, early morning hours. Nevertheless, what did time really matter?

He had approached Polly when she was barely able to stand.

"How much would it be for a gentleman to take his pleasure?"

She was intoxicated, and exhausted. He had not known it at the time, but she had just been turned out of a common lodging house at 18 Thrawl Street, Spitalfields for not having the 4d for a bed. It had been a long day of drinking and walking for Polly, but now the day was over, and the night was His.

"Oy, I barely got energy anymore to even stand, let alone sell me tired cunny to you. But I gotta 'ave me a bed tonight, luv. Come on, over 'ere, we can make a gentlemanly agreement. Wots your name, luv? My, you are a dark man. You aren't a bleeding Joo, are you?"

"No. I am not a Jew. I am dark, because I am full of secrets."

She clucked her tongue and turned ahead of him, staggering abit in the darkness. He realized fully, for the first time, that the streets had grown dead. He could only hear the clomp of hooves on brick several streets away.

"My, bless me, you are a strange one! Well, I know a place just round the corner abit. We won't have any problem there. What's your name, dearie?"

"I-I don't have one. You can call me Saucy Johnnie"

"Well, Johnnie, you can call me Pretty Polly."

She led him through the glorious darkness toward an opening that led to stables, situated between a row of houses and a school. There was only the single gas lamp to give any illumination to his work. She turned and braced herself against the wall.

"Go on, luv...let's be quick about it. I ain't got all night..."

But then, she never lived to see the day.

Oh, the first one was such a beauty! Such a real treat! I gave her no time to squeal, and her tired old cunny could never have given me the pleasure that her death agonies did. I could feel myself slide down my leg, hot, and hit the ground...but how careful I was, hardly a drop on me. I slit her throat from ear to ear then laid her down and slit the abdomen, and stabbed the filthy cunt that she tried to sell to me...

No one had noticed a man walking bloody through the streets in the early morning hours. But then, it wasn't as if he had to escape on foot.

The night enclosed around him. He was being of pure righteousness...Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, creator and destroyer, and this was the *Kali-Yuga*: the age of destruction, the aeon of all-consuming darkness.

He had studied secrets of the Orient, had been initiated into a Secret Brotherhood, but that had only been the beginning. His Lodge had been the tip of a vast iceberg, whose limits he could only dare guess. They had shown him a way to power and the inner workings of consciousness, and now he saw; now he fully understood.

There were adepts that had pierced through the veil between one world, and another. They were the Illuminated Ones, who truly understood the will of Jah-Bul-On, and required each initiate to take a solemn oath binding them to this Great Work. He had taken the oath, and been shown the secrets to traveling through the gates---

Moreover, there had been no returning. I was aware from that moment on that I need not be bound and constrained by the same laws of physics that dictate the world of ordinary men. There are no limits now. The Judgment Day draweth nigh. I am simply a voice crying in the wilderness, preparing the way for He Who Cannot Be Named.

The next one had been "Dark Annie", nine days later. That was how she introduced herself, and she had been feistier than the

last one. They had haggled for a bit, over prices, and he had even been spotted that time. Nevertheless, what did it matter now, there was no catching him.

It had been in a yard behind a lodging house in Hanbury Street. This one was, physically, even more repellent than the last. She was vermin. He wanted to exterminate her, praise God.

The door had been unlocked; the creaky old shambles was being let to a small army of people. He followed her quickly through a short passage to the yard, and then she had customarily lifted her skirts for him.

This one was even more a sensation of bloodletting than the last. He had cut the throat from right to left, a great jagged smile to pierce the flabby white neck. Then he had torn flesh from the abdomen, disemboweling his dear Dark Annie and leaving strings of intestines thrown over the right shoulder. He had left even more fatty flesh over the left shoulder. He had then begun to remove the women parts, the sinful parts, taking her uterus and part of her vagina and bladder. In the words of Dr. Bagster Phillips, which he had read in *The Lancet*, "Obviously the work was that of an expert-or one, at least, who had such knowledge of anatomical or pathological examinations as to be enabled to secure the pelvic organs with one sweep of the knife." Well, that really was the icing on the cake!

He had finally finished his work by rearranging her rings and pocket money between her legs. As a final flourish, he left two new farthings there.

"For Charon," he had whispered. Then he left his first clew: a leather apron. It was all such a funny little game. It gave him real fits.

They thought that it must have been a Jew.

A Jew.

A Jew.

"Achoo!" he said to himself, laughing, ready to take up pen and paper again at any moment. All he heard about anymore on

the streets was that he was a seedy Jew butcher, because everyone knows that an Englishman could never perpetrate such a crime.

He was unstoppable.

He had done that one just before dawn. It was always good to see the sun come up, to begin a new day. To have new adventures, and to spill fresh blood.

Breakfast and Prayer

Merrick peeped above his knees late in the morning. His dreams had been troubling; no, astounding really, haven taken him on a bizarre trip to a place he could not fully even comprehend. His head swam with the weirdness of it all, and as he managed to raise his small, hunched shape from the bed and stand up, he still wondered, perhaps, if he was not merely dreaming.

It had been frightening and wonderful, in the same measure. Why, he half-believed that he really had been able to walk down Commercial Street, invisible to the eyes of the men and women who were walking the same early morning street as he was traversing. It had been a revelation; he had never dawdled long in public to just *examine* things.

Then he had actually dreamt that he had come back to Bedstead, as if it was entirely normal, and sat down to sleep at day break.

Why does this keep happening to me? Am I going mad, or is this simply the type of dream a person is bound to have now and again? These nightmares have gotten worse, increasingly more bizarre. Perhaps this really is God, trying to send a message to me. However, if so, what am I to make of it? In addition, why do I feel as if I have been awake all night?

He went into the next room to wash the night sweat off him, stopping first to pour some water from the pitcher that was sitting near his bed. My, he was incredibly thirsty!

Upon returning realized that a staff member had brought his breakfast tray, and simply left it without disturbing. He hobbled over to it, and lifted the lid of his tray. Oh my! Eggs,

ham, fried potatoes, and a wonderful pudding! He sat down at once and began to devour the delicious-smelling stuff. It was rare that they ever sent him such a sumptuous breakfast, but Freddy must have ordered it.

Trying to make up for his outburst the other night. He must feel horrible guilt and frustration, at times. It is not as if I know what being an important doctor and lecturer is like. I shall have to try, from now on, to be as sympathetic to him as he has been to me.

He ate greedily, shoveling it in with his one useable hand, and then spied his paper. Good. Nothing like looking through *The Times* after breakfast, and having a healthy belch to start the day off with. He stopped for a minute to unfold the paper, and was suddenly jolted by the headline reading: GHASTLY MURDER!

It was the Ripper. Merrick had heard about him from one of his nurses, and had been quite taken aback by the fear he seemed to generate. After all, bad as it was, it was not as if murder did not occur commonly in the East End. In this case, the same man had struck again, only eight days later.

He quickly scanned the column. Suddenly, he felt curiously uneasy, as if, somehow, the morning had been corrupted by the story of what had happened to those poor women. Ah, this Ripper was a "right-bastard", as Tommy Norman would have said. Merrick felt queasy, reading about the mutilation of Annie Chapman.

Why do I suddenly feel like I am being thrust into something that I do not completely understand?

He threw the paper down. He did not have to think about it if he did not want to. He was safe here, in London Hospital. The Ripper was out there, in the streets, taking lives that were not as protected and (he was forced to admit) *valued* as his.

He did not have to think about unpleasantries. Here was breakfast, and a bath, and safety and comfort. He didn't have to think about the dirty world he had come from, did he?

Evil? Have I forgotten that evil exists? Perhaps that is what God is trying to say to me, that I should remember that all is not well with the world

around me, and that, despite my comforts, there is still a world out there that needs to be prayed about, and considered. I hope that I have not been un-Christian since I have come to live here.

Joseph very solemnly bowed his head, and began to pray.

"Oh Lord," he began, "please help the government authorities to find the Ripper, before he kills again. In addition, Lord, please have mercy on the souls of both the women, which he killed, and see that you do not judge them very harshly, as I know myself that circumstances can go against you in life. Protect the city of London and the people of the East End. Amen."

He stopped. Then quickly added:

"And Lord, if you could see fit to do something about these bloody nightmares..."

Double Murder

The next one was a glorious comic opera of violence. *Messieurs* Gilbert and Sullivan could not have conceived of a more bizarre, appalling, and altogether hilarious situation.

The first one had been Long Liz. He had caught her in Berners Street, and it had been almost nothing to convince her that he was just a regular gentleman looking for a quick fuck in the courtyard. As she lifted her skirts, in near total darkness, he could still hear a rousing song being sung from the premises of the International Working Man's Educational Club.

"You know, I meant it."

"Wot?"

"What I told you. You would say anything, but your prayers...you would never say your prayers."

"Why in bleedin' hell would I?" She had seemed a bit nervous then, and so he had had to regain her trust in him quickly. He placed his hand in the pocket of his long black coat and pulled out a small paper bag of cashews.

"Here," he said, "I rather think you will fancy these."

"My", she had said, "thank you". Then she nodded in the

direction of the singing, "that lot would do good to quiet down abit."

"Really?" he had answered her, pulling her by her shoulder nearer to him in the dark. "I really rather like it myself. It should certainly stifle your screams."

"Oh, I ain't a screamer, dearie."

She had been right. He had cut the throat deeply, and she had never had the chance to make the slightest squeal.

But damnit, he had not time to mutilate this one, for almost as soon as he set to work, he was interrupted by the steady tread of hobnailed boots upon the cobbles. The constable would be around within moments, and the lust had not yet been sated.

Therefore, he had simply walked until another opportunity had presented itself. Catherine Eddowes he had met in Mitre Square, and she had introduced herself in the foul way that these women were accustomed too. Of course, if he had been a normal man, the danger of murdering and savagely mutilating her in the middle of Mitre Square, which was patrolled by a constable every fifteen minutes and surrounded by warehouses with night watchmen, would probably have dampened his homicidal ardor. However, he was, most assuredly, by this point no ordinary man.

Oh! Moreover, he had done such a wonderful job on that last one: it was enough to make a coroner vomit, and he had made no mistake that this one was killed in the supreme act of ritual slaughter.

He had cut the throat, hacked off the nose, and proceeded to disembowel her in a matter of moments. He had taken a ginny bit of kidney, and ripped her smelly cunt apart. By the time 881 Watkins came back around and shined his bullseye lantern on the ground, he had a wet, butchered corpse to with which to contend.

It had been little under an hour. Already he could feel the cone of energy rise; the vibrational level began to tip the scales of the cosmos in his favor. Moreover, he knew he was evolving.

He was now no longer even the tall "foreign-looking"

gentleman, in the deerstalker cap---who ripped whores. Now he had taken on yet another new identity, in a seemingly endless shift of variations of himself that created a kind of sacred wheel.

In Goulston Street, he had chalked upon the wall "The Juwes are not The Men that Will be Blamed for nothing". Blamed if he didn't like that. He kept repeating it to himself, slowly. He had then thrown down a piece of her bloody apron. He was not exactly sure why he had done this, but he knew it would give them real fits.

They had formed the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee in his wake; they were calling for the resignation of Warren, and holding mass meetings that had all the fervor of the lynch mob about them. They still thought he must be a Jew, "Leather Apron", or a foreigner.

Maybe they were right. Perhaps he was all three of them. Even he was not sure anymore.

Soon, it would be time to begin again. He had been busily writing letters to the police, incensed that others were sending in missives claiming to have attained the same state of transcending grace, which he had achieved. They were comic letters, what one might send to a friend or lover who was far away. In addition, he had signed the first one *Jack the Ripper*.

He had written: "*...The next job I do I shall clip the ladies ears off and send them to the police officers just for jolly wouldn't you?*"

Yes. He had promised them an ear. Why hadn't he taken them? He began to laugh hideously. "If any man have an ear, let him hear..." He let the words crawl out of his belly, and hiss in the stale air.

There was a certain poetry; he had to admit, in the fact that he had not actually sent them. He looked around the confines of his verminous lodging. Up here, it was dark, and wonderful. Downstairs, the old woman would be sitting in her rocker reading

the Bible. The old man would be pulling at his pipe, and then the both of them would retire to a sexless bed and sleep a dreamless sleep to prepare them for the sleep from which there is no waking. He sat in the dark, and felt tiny insects crawl from the mattress onto his body.

Eat... feed...take life from my body. I am the Alpha and Omega; the First and the Last...eat of my flesh, drink of my blood...

"They say I am a doctor now *ba ha!*"

He would be sure to send them a note about it.

Freddy had entered earlier than usual---and damn jaunty, *too*.

Merrick was a little taken aback; Freddy had been such a frightful mass of nerves lately, to see him so healthy and happy was quite a turn. However, maybe his prayers were being answered.

"Morning, Merrick", said Treves, just a little strained after their last meeting.

"Good morning, Doctor Treves," said Merrick, belying no change after the bizarre conversation of two nights ago.

"Well, I must say it is shaping up to be a tremendously nice day, don't you think so Joseph?"

Merrick ambled over to him and gave his hand a firm shakes. He had a lot he wanted to tell Freddy today, but he supposed it was just as well he not say too much. It seemed like whenever he set out to specifically do anything, he somehow made a mess of it.

"Well, how have you been doing lately, health wise, my very *patient* patient? It has been quite sometime since we have performed any real examinations upon you. I apologize about the last couple of days, Joseph. I was called away rather suddenly on some business matters, and I haven't been able to..." Treves strode purposefully around the little room, taking in Merrick's collection of photos and trinkets. Then his eyes fell upon the morning paper, still unfolded by the half-eaten breakfast, which Merrick

neglected to finish, and which had grown cold on his table.

"Oh," he remarked, "you didn't finish you breakfast."

"Yes, Freddy, I was going to ask you about that. Why did you order so much good food for me? I don't deserve it."

"You don't? Well, of course you deserve it. I ordered it specifically for you. I want you to begin eating better. We have ample funds set aside for your care and upkeep, so there is no excuse for them to keep sending up the same sort of bland stuff we give to common patients. It is unhealthy for you, my friend."

If Merrick could have smiled, he most certainly would have. As it was, his eyes said, *I know there is another reason as well.* However, his mouth stated, "I thank you very much for your concern Treves, but what I meant was that I wanted to apologize for how I behaved the other night. I think that I was not as good of a friend as I could have been."

Treves drew himself up very seriously for a moment, and his face turned grave.

"Joseph..." he began, "I fear that sometimes our intimacy as friends threatens my judgment as a physician. I was very tired, the other night, and I did not particularly care for a few things that you had said. I did not mean to---*honestly do not---suggest that you had done anything wrong.* In fact, it is I who has let my professional detachment go, and it does a disservice to you, as my patient."

Joseph turned his back to Treves a moment, and walked over to the mantle. There, resting upon it was the tiny framed portrait of his dear mother Mary Jane. What would she have demanded of him in a situation such as this? He full well knew.

The utmost humanity.

"Freddy, please, just accept the fact that our friendship is real, and permanent, and cannot end. And, if I was unsympathetic, forgive me."

At that, Treves had nothing to say. He stood for a moment, and then changed the subject altogether.

"Have you read the paper today, my friend? All of London is in an uproar. The same man has killed four women in just a

little less than one month. The last one..." Freddy stopped for a moment and scanned the column.

"Ah yes, the *first* one was committed less than two blocks away." He looked at Joseph for a moment, as if to say does not this fascinate you? However, Joseph merely puttered from the mantle back to his comfortable chair.

"I suppose evil rules the world. It's what the Bible tells us, at any rate." Merrick felt a bizarre uneasiness, all of a sudden.

"Well," said Treves, "I have to go make rounds, my good fellow. Um, I have arranged for Halsted to come and do some measurements later, after your bath. All right by you? Good. I may stop in tonight Joseph, but do not rely on it: I have been tremendously busy of late, as you well know. Well, cheerio. I hope next time I see fit to order you a special breakfast you decide to be so good as to finish it."

Merrick nodded.

"Good day," he said simply. He felt such a growing feeling of deep misgiving, it would have been impossible to describe accurately.

Yet, he was still not sure exactly *why*.

Oh! Murder

"I have seen an evil thing this night," he said; "I have seen how the dead drink the blood of the living. And the blood is the life."

---F. Marion Crawford,
"For the Blood is the Life"

It was nearly the beginning of November, and the cycle was almost complete.

It was going to require one more, one more supreme act of incredible, overwhelming savagery to bring into fruition that which he had in mind. He had already had his wench picked out.

Kelly. Another "fallen woman". East End streets seemed to be crawling with them.

They had come for him in the middle of the night, their

black fire seemed to cling to every corner of the room. Hideous--*they were*, but also wonderful. Terrifying, and great, all in the same measure. Beings indescribable and unimaginable. They had shown him a world that he could not possibly even begin to conceive of.

It was a world of eternal darkness, and pagan truth. The Angel had stepped right through the wall of his lodging room that night, and vomited up a great flame that had encompassed him.

"Come closer to me. Closer..."

He had been pulled from bed by one immense long hand and held as if he was weightless above the ground. Then they had journeyed through the portal, into the land where spirits flutter like glowing cloth.

"Where are we going?" He had asked.

"To hell. This is the way of things. We have all of eternity."

"Am I dead then?"

"Not in a manner of speaking. Death is merely a transitional phase. Rather say, you are reborn."

It had been a place conceived in the most unhallowed dreams of forbidden anguish. There were not words to describe what he had seen, then. It had been a cavernous place, blacker than the dirt of a baby's grave, and he had seen them. Far below, crawling like a vast ocean of repugnant insects. Unformed, and suffering. Crawling about each other, over each other, and underneath each other. They held the merest suggestion of any form.

"What are they?" he had asked, as the Angel led him across the black chasm of the abyss. They were nearly on top of a vast sea of crawling, malignant forms.

"Larvae," he had answered, with no explanation, but none was needed.

The chamber was almost numbingly limitless; indeed, the ceiling could not be seen, and the walls seemed to stretch upward to heights beyond the mind's ability of comprehension.

"They have been filling up this chamber since the beginning of time. They are trapped here, maggots whose only

recourse is to feed upon each other. Below even them, however, is another level of suffering."

He was curious.

"And how does one escape suffering? Is there an escape?"

The Angel did not answer, but led him onward.

Now they seemed to be absorbed by the repellent ooze of the walls, and into a tunnel leading out into some further realm of the grotesque.

At the end of the tunnel was a sort of sickly, smoky light and beyond, he felt his feet touch the firmness of solid ground for the first time. As far as he could tell, it looked as if he was in some sort of miserable, dank basement. He could only see the palest, trickling illumination coming from some source that he could not identify. Then he turned and noticed the Angel was gone.

She had been down on her luck, as of late, occupying a four-shilling room in Miller's Court, a narrow court where prostitutes occupied most of the houses. She lived in the back parlor of an old house that had been partitioned off to let. Moreover, Barnett, that stinking bastard, had busted the window.

It is just like him to run off and leave me. Yeah, all men are real animals, they are. All they want is a cunt and a cook. In addition, all they are good for is money.

She sat in her miserable little lodging at number thirteen and bit the edge of a nail. She was hungry, damnit, and there was no food. However, she needed drink too, which was easier to get if she just went down to the pub for a bit and flirted with the working-class men who were always on the lookout for an opportunity to have something to drool upon besides their own haggard wives. Barnett would not be back for a while, she surmised, and she was three months behind on the rent. No food, no rent, and no drink--it had, so far, been shaping up to be a dispiriting day.

She had taken the occasional spill into bed with another

woman, Maria Harvey, and Maria was a hell of a lot better lover than Joe Barnett, who worked as a fish porter and always smelled like a pound of fresh mackerel. Joe suspected, well, *knew* really that she was essentially homosexual, and he resented it. However, what did she care? He looked like a walrus and smelled like a fish market, and she hated the annoying way he always repeated the last eight or so words of every sentence.

It gave her real fits.

She was better off alone, she surmised.

She got up from her chair, and wondered where it was she had gone wrong in life. Drink? Ah yes, there was the enemy. Barnett drank too, worthless bastard, and both of them, she knew, were just about right for each other. Oh, if only she could have been decent enough for a man that had actually had some money. Nevertheless, it was the plight of her life.

She looked at the broken window in despair. She had stuffed it with rag, but as if it really mattered, at this point. Let anyone come in and do anything they wanted. Even the Ripper. At this point, she was fairly beyond the idea that she was still, really, living.

She had walked around that night until she found herself in the Commercial Street pub.

She walked in, sashaying abit, giving the men something to stare at. It was dank, smoky, and filled with the busy chatter of voices, and snatches of drunken song.

"Oy, luv, how abouts sit here with your old friend, Bert Dombrey?"

She looked at the disgusting bastard with a cold gaze, but remembering the hunger in her belly, soon sat down at the bench next to him. Lord, wasn't she tired?

"And what would be your name love?"

She sighed.

"Tired is my name."

He seemed confused for a minute, and then lifted the glass

to his mouth. Ugh, she thought. Short man, piccadilly weepers, shabby suit--where is my Knight Errant, when I need him?

"My name is Mary," she finally told him. "And your name is Bert. Bertie, luv, how about buying a pint for the old girl? She's been on her feet all day."

He seemed to brighten a bit, and she finally ended up taking him for a bit of grub as well--some fried fish.

Why must it always be like this? Who made up the rules of the game? Whoever the bastard is, I want another part to play. I really am too tired to even care anymore.

"They ought to call you 'carrot lip, luv'. That moustache looks good enough to eat." She was half-jesting, but she knew she could convince him to come back to number thirteen for a little while. He apparently realized this was a come-on, because then he said:

"Yeah, well, you know, how much? How much? You don't *look* like the cheapest whore in Whitechapel."

She knew she was still passably attractive, and she used it as leverage.

"Well, Carrotty, old bean, if you want a common tart you can go walk down the street a block and your bound to find one. If you want a regular lady, though, you're going to have to pay a bit more."

"Really? Your cunny must be made of gold. How much more?" His breathing was getting ragged, and she wanted to blurt out laughing.

"I mean, I've already bought you food and drink. You can't ask me for much more than that."

She sighed again. She damn well could.

She did not want to lose him, though. Not until she got a little more out of him.

"I'm sure we can make an arrangement, Carrotty. You want to accompany back to my humble *chale?*" My, but she was humorous tonight. No wonder she was always the gentleman's favorite. What the hell. It was a man's world: a girl had to have a

sense of humor about her.

He came out of the darkness, finally, in the Jew's Cemetery. He had not known where they were bringing him, but it was as if, as he was walking through that great dark space where no light could penetrate, the vaults and headstones simply began to come out of the impenetrable darkness around him. He walked, like a somnambulist, through the night. He could hear the howl of the devil's children on the wind, and he knew he had work to do.

"Well, Carrotty, just make yourself comfortable."

The little man was quite drunk. In addition, she noticed, with a bit of amusement that his nose looked a little bit like a radish. He started to unbutton his drawers with trembling hands, all the time explaining:

"J-j-just l-l-let me get myself ready, luv. I just need to take my time, don't you know."

She smiled. If she were lucky, he would never even be able to get it out before it went off. She could then stand over him and humiliate him until he drunkenly gave her far more money than they had even agreed upon. It might shape up to be a good night.

He stayed mostly to the alleys, relishing the isolation. The streets were still busy with people, but it was gradually beginning to thin, and soon, after midnight, he knew that he would be responsible for bringing the Great Work to a close; they had not taken him to the land of the dead, for no reason; it was there that they wanted to show him the results of his secret working; the accumulation of gross supernatural energy, and another rung on the ladder of his personal evolution.

He ran into a street boy, a young lad of about twelve. The boy obviously wanted something.

"'Scuse me guvnor," said the boy. "Mind sparing a penny two for little Jack Thomas? I ain't had a bite in two days."

He turned and looked at the boy. He looked, for all the

world, like a dirty little old man. The boy suddenly bent close to him, and whispered:

"I'll suck your cock, guvnor. I'll let you fuck me in the arse. We can do it right here, back behind the shops. "

He pushed the boy down with one swift movement of his hand. The lad got up and let a string of profanities fly his way.

"Fucking bastard!" he yelled; " I hope the fucking Reds rise up and take this fucking country away from fucking rich cunts like you!"

He simply walked on.

A passing carriage rattled. Should he try to hail a cab? Where were they leading him? London looked as sprawling and filthy as the legs of a butchered whore.

"Hey, I did all I could. You can't expect me to pay for something like that."

Carrotty had managed to come down one pant leg. She still wanted her money.

"Wot kind of a man are yer? You can't even bugger an old tart. I think you belong in a circus. Give me my money."

He turned pale. He started to shake, not realizing he was standing with his pants still wrapped around his ankles.

"Don't you talk that sort of nonsense to me, you bloody whore! I shall not take that sort of talk from the likes of you! You're damn lucky I don't just come over there and knock you about!"

She stood. She had at least two inches on him.

"I'd like to see you try it."

She put her hands on her hips and just stood there. He suddenly pulled up his pants, gave a snort of indignation, and hurried out the front door. Well, at least he had been good for a little beer and food. Damn. She would have to go back out.

He was in Dorset Street. My, how he hated all of cramped

and filthy London, but Dorset Street was one of the worst, a hive of prostitution and slum living, a sickening display of human animals hanging out of lodging house doors and going up and down the streets drunk.

The streets were oddly vacant, for as early as it was.

He apparently was having an impact.

She had run into a good friend of hers. However, he did not have any money, either. Men. What the hell could you depend on them for?

"Oy, Mary Kelly. Out so bloody late?"

"It's bloody early, Hutch."

"Yeah, well, you should be *bloody* careful. You know--he's still on the loose."

"As if I didn't know that. Hey Hutch, probably don't have a little you could spare do yer?"

"Look, I've already told yer, Mary. I don't have even doss money. I don't know where my next meal is."

She snorted, "Probably up somebody's arse. Look, I can smell gin on you. Liar. Don't you have even a penny for pretty Mary?" She batted her eyelashes at him. She knew he always liked that.

"Sorry luv, not even a grain of dust in the bottoms of my trouser pockets." He sounded genuinely sympathetic that time. Sympathetic towards himself.

"Yeah, well I've got to go find some money. Good morning."

She walked away toward Thrawl, and, like unexpectedly found her prospect.

He was tall, well dressed, and seemed to be dark in the handsome, good-looking way that men in novels are described. She brightened; here was a promising gent.

"And what," she began, "would a gentleman like you be doing out on a night like this, without the accompaniment of a beautiful lady?"

He smiled. He had a wonderful moustache; the kind of moustache that actually added to a man's appearance. All right. Here was her ticket.

"I might be persuaded to join the young lady, if we could but agree on a price."

She smiled, however she felt a slight unease begin to steal over her. There was something not *quite* right about his manner; he seemed strange. She suddenly remembered what Hutch had said about the Ripper still being on the loose. She looked back in the direction from which she'd come, and saw him leaning into the archway of Miller's Court. Was he spying on her?

Hutch's presence somehow stifled her fear. She turned to the tall, imposing stranger, and said, "How about three pence? Going rate? Sir?"

He seemed to be considering this. Then, he said, "That seems a little paltry, don't you think? Here--"

Moreover, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a half crown. She thought she might faint when he put it in her palm. Her head suddenly shot up.

"Right then, let's go."

Inside, she noticed, almost for the first time, that he had been carrying a kind of black bag with a clasp handle. She thought it looked like a doctor's bag.

"What you got in there, guvnor? More money?"

She tried to get him to laugh and speak a little, but he seemed curiously unwilling to talk. He sat his bag down on the little table near the bed, and then said, "I am a professional man. A medical expert and a tireless researcher into all aspects and areas of the human experience."

Blimey, this here is an odd duck. What the hell have I gotten myself into?

"Yeah, well do you want me to lie down and turn over, or just spread em for you missionary style?"

He walked in a little circle around the tiny room. Then, he

looked at her, as if he could not quite figure out what form of life she actually was.

"I don't particularly care. As a matter of fact, I have no intention of having any sexual congress with you whatsoever. The very idea is repellent to me as a gentleman, and as a physician, I can tell you that the risk of venereal disease is a hundred times greater for those men that choose to frequent prostitutes. I did not come here to spend my passion. I came here, to learn the *secret*."

She looked at him quizzically, and popped herself down on the bed.

"What bloody secret? What the hell are you talking about?"

Good night. I wish I had rather just went to sleep. How in the hell will I get rid of this bloody loon?

He looked into a dark corner of the room. Suddenly, he could hear thumping, the pounding of hands, the rapping of a thousand hungry souls waiting for nourishment. Waiting to cross over. From beyond the gate.

"The secret of the Seven Fold Gate. I want to open the pathway between the worlds of the living--"

He suddenly bore down upon her, grabbing her chin in one immensely powerful hand, and using the other to sever the carotid artery. Blood spurted from the fresh cut, bathing the wall next to the bed, and spattering his clothing. However, he was beyond caring at this point.

He looked at his hands. They were dripping red. Her face still held the anguished look of shock that it did right before he had sliced her neck open. Her face. Her face. Well, he would do *something* about the face.

"As I was saying..." he began again. He did so much like to educate the ignorant.

Bath Time

Merrick was sitting in the tub room.

Hildy Watkins bent over him, her face a strange, lifeless

mask. Merrick had not quite liked the look she had given him when she had entered his room. She seemed even more distant today than he had ever seen her. Like--

Her mind is not her own. There is something else there. Is she in some sort of Opium revel? I cannot, for the life of me, figure out how she became a member of the nursing staff. She looks as if she belongs in an asylum.

Merrick felt her hands move over his body, and tried to relax. Something was making him feel extraordinarily nervous, and perhaps it was not simply the glassy, far-away look in Hildy Watkins eyes. It seemed that, lately, everything had been wrong. Freddy had seemed distant, and each day that he came to visit, it seemed like they had less and less to discuss. And, well, he had felt so *peculiar*, lately.

He could feel Hildys hands sponge him, moving over the gross flesh and the fibrous tissue. She seemed to be taking her time today, letting the water drip over him, and essentially just staring into a lonely place, somewhere beyond . He had tried to speak to her several times, but to no avail. She would murmur a reply that made little sense, so he decided to just lie back, and enjoy the sensation.

It was dim, in the tub room, and reasonably secluded. It always made him slightly drowsy, and so he would just lean forward a little, with his head put into his good hand, and let his thoughts wander.

My! Her hand feels so delicious. It seems as if she is trying, consciously, to inspect me. Every inch of me. What in the hell is this woman on about?

He closed his eyes and started a real terrific dream, some business about him being a dashing young Prince, fighting a dragon, trying to rescue a fair maiden from the clutches of some evil sorcerer. Suddenly, he gasped.

My god! What is she doing to me!

He felt her hand slip around his penis, and clutch it. For a moment he was so stunned he felt as if he might drop dead of fright. His member became fully engorged.

He babbled. He had no idea what sort of demonic entity had possessed her. He had never had such a thing happen to him in his entire life.

Slowly, beneath the filthy bath water, she began to stroke his member. He could only sit there, witless, and let her do it.

Oh, for the love of God! Please, do not stop that. I do not know why you are doing that, or what the matter with you is. But please, do not stop...

Now she was pulling it roughly, furiously. He felt a curious ecstasy build inside of him. His entire pelvis felt like it was made of flames. He began to gurgle, and moan. And then---

"Oy, what the hell is going on in here?"

A familiar voice had come from the little cubby area behind the whirlpool bath. He had been secreted, curious. Now, he had seen something, which he knew, was deeply wrong. Merrick knew the voice.

It was Dick Neville.

She stopped, pulled her hand from the bath, and stood--- just staring at him. Merrick, barely able to breathe, turned and looked at the two of them.

Dick looked at her as if she might have been burning alive. Suddenly, he stepped forward, and slapped her across the face. She registered no emotion.

Merrick was led from the bath by an orderly. The situation had turned into something of a fiasco, as Neville had very quickly alerted the Head, and Watkins was dismissed. The authorities were never called. They simply did not want that sort of scandal reaching the public. Treves brought it up cautiously, later. Merrick, for his part, had not minded at all.

His dreams had been particularly vivid that night.

It was the next day that he had received a new package. There had been no identifying mark upon the plain brown wrapper. He was a little excited by that. It had been the same when he had received *Frankenstein*.

Who could be sending me such gifts, and why is it they wish to conceal their identity? It would be nice if they would include their name, so I could be sure to send them a thank-you letter in return. However, who am I to regret their beneficent charity.

He quickly pulled open the brown wrapper, and saw to his great delight that it was, in fact, another book. A slim volume, it bore the title *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Oh, he was quite pleased by this! He had heard of this particular tale, and was quite eager to have now a chance to read for himself. He sat down almost immediately, opened to the flyleaf, examined some of the fine print (which was a way for him to build the suspense abit), and then set into the first page. Immediately, it took firm hold of his brain.

A Lawyer named Mr. Utterson, some business about a Dr. Jekyll, and then, horrors, a boogey that would put Springheel Jack to shame. He knew slim as it was he was going to read this one straight through. It would take him a few hours.

Finally, as it began to get dark, and as his bones began to hurt from being bent over, he polished off the final chapter. He sat back, in the gathering gloom, and considered. Poor Henry Jekyll---it certainly did not do for a civilized man to let the beast out of him. That was what being a cultured gentleman was all about, dealing with the nasty side of you.

Joseph got up for a moment, and as he stood, his mind was busily putting things together. He sat down upon his bed, and looked out the window across Bedstead. He almost felt that there was something he was missing.

Why, all of a sudden, did he have the chills?

The Visitor Returns

He turned down the lamp, and sat on his bed, curled up, with his head resting on his knees. The world had started to seem a strange, almost frightening place lately.

Freddy, Nurse Ireland, even old Dick Neville had started acting peculiar...out of character. He could not quite grasp what, but he knew that, somehow, things were substantially altered from the way that they had been.

The hospital, of course, had maintained its own organic composition. It was the same hustling, bustling place that it had always been. His breakfast was brought to him on time, his bath was given to him now by Nurse Ireland, Hildy Watkins (he well knew) having been thrust from service and swept under the official rug. Freddy still popped in, upon occasion...but he was not the same Freddy. He was altered, distant. Always official, but still acting bloody ...peculiar. On the other hand, was it just him?

He thought, for a moment, that he might actually be losing his mind.

Ab good. Comfort. Serenity. This world has become confusing. People are acting in strange ways that I have never experienced before. It is too much for me to reckon with. I feel like I only have myself now, for company.

He fell asleep gradually.

He had taken the flesh off the face. The head twisted, with a ghoulish, blood-spattered grin. The legs were splayed. Her stomach he had ripped open and laid bare; entrails and liver ripped clean out and placed between the legs. Her head, he had nearly severed, along with her left arm. It was diabolical in its intense, masterful realization of all that he had hoped to achieve.

He took the breasts and cut them off. Such tender slices, he felt, deserved to be on display. After all, Mary had been pretty lass.

He put them on the table beside the bed, where they sat, like gruesome reminders that a woman had once lived here. Blood spattered the wall in bright gay splashes. The bed was a sopping ruin of sickening gore. Finally, he took one of the undamaged hands, and placed it into the stomach.

He did not know why. He had been at his leisure while he was doing this, had had time to really enjoy the mania of his own blood lust. He felt the front of his clothing. He was wet with

blood himself, although, he had proceeded with additional caution... He started a fire in the grate.

He burned his gloves, along with various articles of clothing he found in the wardrobe.

"Come. I have something more to show you."

Suddenly, Merrick knew that there would be no peace that night. It had returned, yet again. His *shadow* man.

"Why don't you leave a body alone?" he mumbled wearily.

"Because there are things that you do not understand, but that must be reckoned with. The situation is not of your choosing. All paths flow toward the same common stream."

Merrick quickly got up from the bed, and followed the shadow once more. This time, it was out of the ceiling, and suddenly, they were standing in front of a darkened, broken window, and the Shadow told him, "I want you to look inside."

Merrick bent low, and by the light burning in the grate, he saw something that caused him to absolutely stagger.

There was a hideous monster, more hideous than even him, bent over the butchered parts of something that must once have been a human being. He felt fear, and revulsion, squeeze his belly.

The scene was revolting. A nightmare of butchery--only a white leg and arm remained amidst all the blood and grue. It was like some lunatic had vomited a vision of rage out from between his gaping teeth, and what resulted was this shocking, charnel nightmare. A severed head and guts strewn as if the woman had exploded from within...It was too much. The dark figure hunkered low over blazing fire he was building from bits of old dress.

"I want you to look at the man Joseph. Look at him, and tell me who do you see?"

Joseph, at first, had no recognition whatsoever; that face seemed to have been borne from a nightmare.

It was not until the figure fully emerged from the room that

he felt true shock, shock almost more terrible than any he had ever felt before in his entire life.

To begin with, the character had not had to open the door. He had simply walked through it.

Secondly, he had recognized the man---the *Ripper*, he now knew.

It was Frederick Treves.

Freddy and Anne

Treves had emerged from his study, where he had gone first upon returning home. Anne had been sitting in front of the mirror, putting her hair up and worrying about looking fashionable. For his part, he looked like he had been in the streets, all night.

He had, apparently, gone out walking---telling her he would be back in a few moments. He barely remembered it; it seemed like it was several days ago.

There had been mud on his boots. What had he been doing? Sometimes, he knew, his thoughts became so furious that he somehow lost track of time.

His hands had been dirty--he had washed them several times, but it seemed like they had a sort of invisible filth on that that he could not cleanse away. His clothes had curious stains that he had not wanted to examine too closely.

Well, he had come in, stripped them off, and put them in an old basket. Better to burn them. Better to get rid of them than think for too long about any of those stains. He had carefully washed himself then. Washed hair off him, and other foul substances that had seemed to be clinging to his being.

He had approached her that morning---with caution.

"Well, where were handsome husband and doctor all night? I thought you said you simply had a patient to look after. Was it Mr. Merrick, poor dear? You know, when I think of all the good you have done that man since you've met him, you make me the proudest wife in the entire world."

She was prattling, fussing with herself in the wardrobe mirror. He said, tiredly, "...Yes, I have a new patient that seems to have a great deal of trouble with certain abnormalities related to sleep. I thought that I might step out and check up on him."

She did not believe a word of it, he knew. However, she punctuated a little snort with a blast of perfume. She stood, tightening her corset and never, once, really looking at him, except in her mirror.

"Well, how is the gentleman, Freddy? Is the gentleman going to be all right? Let us hope so, poor dear. Or is it a woman you've been looking after?" The insinuation in her voice was plain.

"Oh, no. No, it is a Mr...Dombrey. He's a Barrister."

She frowned. She dabbed more perfume upon herself. He thought the smell was quite overpowering, already.

Outside, the sun was beginning to shine again, and an increased traffic in the road let the entire neighborhood know that it was time to begin a new day.

She looked at him.

"You know, my dear, you really are a frightfully bad liar. I do not know specifically what you do some evenings, but I know that you are not with your patients. Most of the time you are not even with Merrick. Well, I am your wife, and I suppose it is not my place to prod you about such things. However, do remember this: I know you, Freddy. I know you even better than you know yourself, and I have noticed that, lately, it is as if I am not even living with the same man that I married. Oh, I have no general complaints about our life. But, if you're going to hide a secret life from me, just assure me that I'll never have to be troubled about it myself."

"Fine. You shall believe whatever you like. If you will excuse me." He felt limp.

He walked down the staircase, and across the front room, to the parlor. It was comfortable, and he could sit in and relax for a few minutes. He would soon have to be at the hospital, and God knew that he was exhausted beyond the hope of even his typical

snuff of cocaine.

He sat in his reclining leather chair, and stared into space. He seemed to recall vividly something odd occurring. However, perhaps, he was simply confusing the memory.

Did I buy some books recently? Novels, things that I would never spend my time reading. Didn't I send them to someone, as a gift?

He sighed, rubbed his eyes, and felt, for all the world, as if he was on the verge of a nervous collapse.

Where had he been? Why did he not remember? Why did he seem to have a memory...

...of a lodging house?

Anne Treves had gone down to his study later, not sure, exactly, what it was she was looking for.

It must be another woman. I suppose he has a secret collection of letters. I will ferret out the little wench, and when I do, there will be hell to pay.

She crept slowly into the darkness. She never, even in the best of times, came in here. It simply did not seem proper for a good, obedient wife to go rummaging through her husband's business, especially business as important as Freddy's. She looked hard over the immaculate desk, the stacks of dusty medical texts, and the strange bottle and spoon that had been the only thing left carelessly lying about.

She looked at the cocaine bottle, uncomprehendingly, and then opened his desk drawer. There were some papers that had been pushed very far back, and what seemed to be clippings from popular magazines.

She took the papers out of the desk drawer, and looked at them. She registered no initial shock. It seemed that Freddy had just been playing some sort of absent-minded game.

They were anatomical charts. Ripped, it would seem, from some of his books.

But, oh, they had such vile language written all over them.

In addition, a few faces, clipped from magazine ads, which had been pasted onto the cross-sections of the human head.

They were women's faces.

He had written the word *whore* over a hundred times, it had seemed, on one of the charts. He had drawn angry slashes through the sexual organs.

She suddenly thrust them back into the top drawer. She did not understand what it all meant.

Moreover, she did not really want to.

Part the Second: The Great Unmasking

The Repairer of Worlds

Tom walked soberly down the street, wondering why it was not possible to vanish off the radar screen of the world. No more rent to pay, no more bills, no stifling matriarchal influence to remind him of what, deep inside, he had always truthfully known.

He was fundamentally, a flawed human being.

He was short, near-sighted, and his hair had begun to fall out even before he had turned eighteen. What's more, he was typically, desperately broke. It was not as if he did not want to work, but his disposition seemed to forbid a great deal of interaction with other people as a whole. No, for him only a select group of individuals could even, rarely, be tolerated. He was intelligent, slightly neurotic, and almost the very definition of the word *cynic*.

Why had he decided to stay here, in the same town, on the same campus, after graduation? Had he really, experienced anything better, more substantial or satisfying since he had been here? On the other hand, was it simply that, at this point, he was too utterly confused about his own destination in the world to do much of anything else. It seemed, sometimes, as if he might forever be locked into the same gloomy cycle.

One-step forward two steps back. That's just super. At least he had Crystal to cheer him. No, that was not quite right. He did not have her, not yet, and in light of recent events, it seemed doubtful that he ever would. Sometimes he wondered if love was worth the effort of the pain that had to be endured when it, inevitably, was lost

Oh, what is the use? We all die in the end, anyway.

This, quite truthfully, was the perception with which he approached most situations.

She had cooked him dinner, a savory meal of roast lamb and garlic potatoes, and they had busily chased the sumptuous meal down with cold soda pop. He knew that he could not live without her. Yet still, it seemed as if there was some vast gulf between the both of them that could never, truly, be traversed.

As they sat on the battered sofa, watching some boring program on television, he seemed to be unable to concentrate. All that really concerned him was his present jobless state. An inability to concentrate had always hounded him, and it had gotten worse lately. It seemed he was going through jobs rather quickly, and even though he was the proud recipient of a college degree, he was damned if it actually made an impression on any employer.

"What did I go to college for anyway?" he said, slowly, feeling the first few tendrils of the steadily worsening depression creep into his spirit. He put his feet upon the coffee table; an act that he knew left her rigid with distaste. She recoiled from him a bit. She was tired of hearing him grumble.

"Oh, you'll find something. And you better do it soon, too, because I don't know how the fuck you're going to pay rent next month."

"Yeah. Fun. Adulthood is a real blast." He was nearly groaning.

She hissed, matronly. "Tom, grow up. Everybody goes through rough times. You'll be okay."

"Yeah, I'll be swell. I can't even keep a simple little job at a convenience store. Bitch didn't like me." He was really talking himself into a nosedive now, feeling the deep sense of dissatisfaction that seemed to torment him beneath the surface, no matter what level of achievement or what he did in life. He stared at the bugged stupidity of the television. Hadn't television programs been far superior when he was growing up, compared to the dross that was on now?

She retaliated by turning away from him, scooting farther over to one side of the couch and crossing her legs in frustration. Nevertheless, she did not understand, he knew. She was only nineteen, and he was almost thirty.

She had a decent apartment, and he had a miserable little sleeping room that was buggy and hot. She had air-conditioning.

She had a car, a job, a television set and DVD player, and money in the bank. He had a pile of moldy comics, some trading cards, and about a hundred books. His computer was second-hand, as was most of his wardrobe. He was in debt up to his eyeballs.

He had an ex-wife. Best not to even think about that particular situation.

Nobody can truly, ever, understand the suffering of another. We can claim to be sympathetic, but, deep inside, it almost gives us a sense of satisfaction to know that the other person is less fortunate than we are. How could it be otherwise? Self-preservation is the hallmark of the human animal.

"So how is the new novel?" She was trying desperately to pull him out of his funk, and he was well aware of it. However, he also resented it, because it belied an inability on her part to accept the fact that his situation had grown (at least from a financial standpoint) very grim.

"It's sorta been thumping along. I have about nine thousand words so far." He was too distracted to care about his new "novel" presently.

"What's this one about? No more *spirit communications* I hope". She laughed nervously. He smiled.

"No, no spirit communication," he reassured her. He moved closer to her on the couch, letting his arm slip over her shoulder, and she did not pull away. Ah, this was one of the only real pleasures in his un-redeeming life.

"So what is it about exactly? I mean, you've told me a Little--"

"Yeah, well, it's hard for me to explain. It's a novel about me writing a novel about Jack the Ripper and the Elephant Man. Have you ever seen a picture of him? No? Oh my goodness, I am going to have to show you one. It should certainly not do a lot for your pleasant feelings."

"Uh, why do you always have to do the dark stuff?"

"Hey people like it. I can't help it if horror and gloom is what the reading public wants."

"I think it's what you want, Tom. Why don't you try to focus on something happy for once? Maybe write a love story."

He looked down at her. She had scrunched up on the couch and laid her little head in his lap. He could feel the warmth of her soul wash over him, and it gave him such a sense of longing he felt almost, as if he wanted to grab her in his arms and take her into himself as another vital aspect of his own being.

"And," he began coyly, "whose love story would I write, pray tell?"

She smiled up at him.

"Our love story?"

He stopped to consider, and then said in his best Chicago accent, "Naaah!" They both laughed. It was better than sulking when they were alone

He sat at the keyboard in frustration.

It had not been going well, lately. He was not sure exactly where in the hell his story was going. Moreover, he hadn't liked the *Jack the Ripper* section very well.

It was all well and good until he got to the "double event", where he felt himself lose the steam he had had for the two days

previous. He was sitting with a copy of Rumbelow's classic *Jack the Ripper: the Complete Casebook*, but he was surprised, upon re-reading, that he could find no mention of Israel Shwartz, who had seen one of the victims wrestling with a man outside of a pub right before her murder. The man had screamed, "Wot the fuck are you looking at Lipski?", and although it was highly unlikely that this man was actually the Ripper, Tom was at least surprised that he could not find it.

He did not understand alot about "Ripperology", but for his purposes, it was not important. What was important was conveying the story in the best fashion that he could, and that often did not come very easy for him.

Tom's Ripper had decided to remain elusive tonight: as hard as he tried to summon him, he seemed to fail to turn up for an appearance, to fully *be*. What was he to do? Tom knew it took a certain amount of energy and alertness upon his part to correctly channel these beings from his subconscious and to bring them to life upon the printed page. Moreover, his concerns were so great now that he simply could not focus.

He supposed he was retreating into the same type of creeping malaise that had always frustrated so many of his efforts. It was not that he did not *specifically* care; it was simply that so much in life had seemed to absolutely turn against him; he found it hard to count on very much ever going successfully. People, for unfathomable reasons, took a serious disliking to him right away, and to crown it all he was short statured, near-sighted, from a low-class background, and going bald. He was currently unemployed. His life, as far as he could see, was a giant sigh.

His only shining light had been his newfound passion for writing. Well, it was more like a lost and found and lost again passion, as he kept abandoning it every little whipstitch. Then he had met Pickman, and Pickman had seemed to be able to restore his faith in his basic ability to set down his endless, restless dreams into a coherent narrative,

Hell, he figured. He was good at writing. He was terrible,

though, at just *living*.

He had known Crystal for a little over a year, and in that time, their relationship had had more vicissitudes than an amusement park ride. Yet, they were always drawn back to each other, as a moth might be drawn back to a flame that threatened to singe off its wings.

We are always drawn to that which seems to hold the promise of our own destruction. It seems to be the one unalterable fact of human existence.

Their relationship confused her friends, who thought of Tom as a strange pariah that was best left alone--or at the very least, regarded with a certain wary fascination for a moment or two. Like a strange dog, he might be friendly and do a trick, but he might also bite.

"I sometimes don't understand what keeps us together," she had said. It was evening, and she was tired from a night of dealing with delinquent children at her job.

He had started pouting. He seemed to be good at it.

She turned to him on the couch, looking as if she had some awful thing bobbing below the surface of her being, some thing that required expulsion before it ripped its way out of her mind. He was amazed, suddenly, at how old she looked for twenty-three years.

"I'm serious Tom", she had said. "I won't live in the same pit of misery that you do. I cannot look at the world as if it is some sort of bad accident that God had--*or even worse*, like life is a punishment. You know? If you just opened you eyes--"

"Crystal", he tried to cut her off, but she was determined to speak her mind.

"No, let me finish! You walk around with this monkey on your back, and you always frown, and you expect me not to notice that my boyfriend is miserable. Well, I know you are suffering. I suffer, too. But the only way you'll ever get beyond suffering is to make a conscience choice to do it."

"Hey, I try. Okay, but see, it's different for me."

"How is it different? You're always so gloomy."

Then, as if springing it on him in surprise, she remarked, "All my friends say I should drop you. They say you're mostly no fun to be around."

"I am always fun around your friends," he said weakly, but he knew that she was essentially right. He also knew that he did not like a great many of her friends very well.

He turned to her and tried to put his arm around her neck, but he could feel her physically retreat, and so they sat in silence for a long moment. He fought desperately with his urge to just tell her to go ahead and leave him, and find somebody *stable*. That was what every American girl wanted, wasn't it?

"So I'm a pessimist. I'm a weirdo. What exactly do you want from me? Am I supposed to tap dance my troubles away?" He tried to sound contrite, but she was still angry.

He wasn't even sure what had started this. They had simply been sitting on the couch, as always, trying to find something interesting on television, and he had made one off remark that had caused her to blow a fuse. Oh, hell, women were always blowing fuses, and he knew that she had probably had a trying day.

She sounded as if she was losing steam abit, but then said: "No Tom, what I'm trying to tell you is that I have had it up to here with that self-defeating attitude. It's bullshit." Her inner groaning as she said this was audible and he could feel himself wince.

She stopped talking for a minute then just looked at him. This had been boiling for some time. He had not the energy to pull himself out of his current funk, and he knew while he was sitting up most nights writing, his life and financial situation were going to hell.

"Dammit, I care about you, but I don't think you care about anyone but yourself." Crystal was going to work this up into an incredible argument that he was not at all prepared for.

"Hey, that's not fair. You know I care about you. Out of

anyone in this stupid world, you're the one that I care about the most." He was speaking the truth, but it did not seem as if it was going to be good enough for her. She, instead, flared up into an even larger blaze of frustration, and he had to admit, deep inside he could not really blame her.

"Oh, see, there you go: *this stupid world*. Why is it a *stupid* world? Can't you see any of the beauty in it? Why is it you only consider things that are on the dark side of life?" Now she was breathing hard, looking at him as if she had finally managed to work up the nerve to tell him that she thought he was a worthless bastard.

That will be next. Because I do not have a job right now, and she knows that I am a writer, and, according to mommy and daddy, all writers live in "fantasy land".

The Secret Commonwealth

Tom Baker was dreaming.

It was the brightest land in which he had ever walked, and as he made his way down a pleasant country lane, listening to the gentle murmur of the breeze, the droning of fat insects, and the comical chatter of birds, he could feel the warmth of the sun play upon his face in a way in which, in the last two years of his life, he had not had it within himself to appreciate. It was a dark, green country of rabbit-bitten pastures rolling as far and as wide as the eye could see, and below him, the crunch of pine needles seemed to be as loud, nearly, as the gentle rustle of the tall grass that must be somewhere far ahead.

He did not know, exactly, what this place was; a blissfull Elysium of the soul, to be sure, but on what topographical map it could be reasonable thought to be located was a mystery. For the time being he was content to make his way through the tall stand of trees to see what was located on the other side, far off.

The sun was setting in the distance, and the melancholy effect only added to the deep sense of contentment, which he now felt. It was as if liquid love had been poured into his veins, a

soft, soothing balm that he wished he could carry back with him through this land of dreams and be wrapped in like a friendly old blanket upon awakening.

Beyond, the stand of trees finally gave way to a clearing: It seemed to roll flat for a bit, and then dip down into a dark ravine. In addition, in the clearing, Tom could see a familiar hunched shape, at once shocking and comical by the same turn.

Ohmigod, I am dreaming. That is Merrick. This is his country holiday. Am I writing this story or is it writing me?

He had not expected the figure to look as macabre as it did. The head was, indeed, massive, having a kind of loaf-sized tumorous aberration in front, and an equally disturbing sack of what looked to be flesh in the back. He could barely see the side of his face, but it was the only normal aspect of the visage, and from here, he could barely make out the extensive deformities that covered the other half of it. The body was, as he well knew, little, hunched, and twisted miserably.

He considered for a moment approaching him where he sat, on the ground, petting a large, rough-looking dog with his normal hand.

Would he know me? Would he know that I am, busily, re-writing his life story? How did I come here, to Famsley, in 1890?

Merrick, for his part, looked to be the picture of contentment, sitting on the green, beautiful earth, making friends with an old hound.

Suddenly, Tom was sure he wanted to be away from here. He did not like it; this place, all of a sudden, did not feel like some idyllic valley in which time had, apparently, doubled back upon itself. It felt suffocating; alien. It felt like the realm of the dead.

"You're right, you know."

Tom suddenly felt his heart jump. What was that? A voice had just barely whispered at his ear. He turned, slowly, and from the stand of trees from which he had just come, he could see a figure emerging.

It was the figure of a young man in a loincloth; Christ-like,

he seemed to glow from within a sort of sunlight that he carried naturally. His hair, though, was short---black, and his eyes were a mellow brown. He approached Tom, slowly, but with a confidence that let Tom know that he was in control of the situation. Tom stiffened.

"Greetings, Mr. Baker. Welcome to the Secret Commonwealth. Allow me to introduce myself: my name is *Joseph Carey Merrick*."

The Secret Commonwealth (continued)

Tom was unsure of what to say for a moment, but simply let the young man continue. The sun, he realized, had continued to set, although, as far as he could tell it was not getting any darker.

The young man smiled.

"Perhaps I should explain, Mr. Baker. This---is the other side of the coin. The valley between living and dying."

"Am I dead? Is that what this is? Are I dead and I just don't realize it?"

The young man laughed. Tom could see, incredulously, just how handsome, how perfect, ever contour and line of his face looked. If this was Merrick, someone had performed a Herculean miracle of plastic surgery.

"No; no, Tom--may, I call you Tom?--you are not dead. You are dreaming. Well, soul dreaming, more properly. Your body is still lying safely in bed, although, considering how the mosquitoes attack it at night, one might actually wonder just how safe it really is."

He looked around. The sun still had not set. Tom got the impression that, here, it was a kind of eternal sunset. How beautiful.

"Do you see him over there?"

Tom nodded. He was not sure if speaking, at this particular time, would be the most prudent thing. Better to improvise.

"That is his soul, kept happy for all of eternity here, until,

when finally the universe is inhaled back into the fabric of God consciousness, all things cease. Ah, but do they ever really cease?" The young man looked wistful.

matures with the body. The soul that, upon death, finds contentment and rest. That, my friend, is the soul that you see, sitting over there, with the dog. That was the happiest time in his--*our*--life on earth."

"The holiday at Fawsley," Tom said to himself. "That was his happiest time."

"Yes," continued Merrick. "And, more specifically just sitting in the countryside, petting the dog. He was in heaven on Earth, then."

"Now, the second soul," continued Merrick, "is the "astral". It is a kind of wanderer in the etheric. It goes between worlds, from the land of the living to the land of the dead, and through the realm of dreams."

"Then I am---"

"Yes, you are Tom Baker's astral spirit."

"You said there were three souls. Which are you, then?"

He laughed again. The sound was easy, coming from his mouth like the sound of a gurgling brook.

"Oh, well, I suppose that I should have told you that. I am the part of Joseph that will continue, incarnation after incarnation, and *progress*. I am the truest essence of all that he is, and all that he will become---I am the *Ka*, his eternal true form, making my way back to the Godhead, one life at a time."

"It makes no sense to me---but, I believe you. But, why am I here then?"

"Well," said Merrick, "that is complicated. You see, Tom, you have created a sort of problem in the alignment of things---a *wrinkle* in the fabric, if I may be so bold. But please, walk with me."

Together they went back toward the stand of trees, and into greater darkness. The sun still had not set, and Tom realized, for the first time, that, here at least, it never really would.

"You see, Tom, it's like this--you suppose that you are simply writing a novel, but that, in fact, is *not* the case. When you begin to re-write the history of something, you *alter* it somehow. In your case, you have so altered it, that there are repercussions being felt in far-off quarters the likes of which you have never even dreamt of. Do not take for granted the power of fantasy, of *dreams*. I tell you truthfully that it is dreams that create the fabric of all that we see, or seem."

Tom stopped for a second, and looked at his companion.

"Edgar Allen Poe. That's a reference to Poe."

Merrick said nothing, but continued:

"We have no issue with your creativity. Creativity is the hallmark of any being that bears the divine spark of God within him. However, in your case, certain channels have been opened. The gates have been thrown wide, and there are powers and principalities slipping through that you dare not reckon with. We wish you to reconsider the outcome of your particular tale. In fact, your salvation may depend upon it."

Tom did not like what he was hearing, and did not particularly want to listen anymore. However, said, "I see. Well, I will certainly consider your advice. However, you must understand, I am not the first person to write a fictional account of the life of---of *your life*, I suppose. Nor am I, by any means, the first person to use the Ripper as a character in a story."

Merrick turned and looked at him, and his gaze was suddenly steely; ferocious.

"You don't understand, do you? This is not just about your novel anymore. This is about something greater than you, something that survives forever. This is about *souls*, Tom. Souls crying out to you, because you have trapped them in your fiction. You have re-written their history, and now their suffering from

one side of the etheric plane to the next. You must right the schism. Only you can do it."

Tom considered, and then said, "But how do I know that any of this is *true*."

Merrick withdrew then, and the same peaceful look played over his features.

"You don't. This is a dream. You must have faith. In faith, is wisdom."

Merrick seemed to look up at the sky for a moment, and then looked at Tom again, with that same all-knowing look of absolute patience and serenity.

"It is time for you to go. We will meet again--in the place in which there is no darkness."

And he was gone.

Tom stood for a moment, and just considered all that he had been told. Then, he wondered aloud:

"The place in which there is no darkness? Where have I heard that before?"

He suddenly recognized it. It was what O'Brien had told Winston Smith at the end of the novel *1984*. He smiled, ruefully.

Suddenly, voices began to emerge from the treetops, hissing. A gradual cacophony that finally seemed to be the sound of a thousand angry snakes, all hissing his name.

"Tom!"

He awoke with a start, expecting to see a giant hissing snake leaning over his bed, ready to engulf him.

Crystal

"Tom! Wake up, it's time to get up and eat."

He was surprised, when he finally came round, to see Crystal standing over his bed.

"Wha-what are you doing here? How did you get in?"

She had, in fact, met the Jamaican graduate student that lived in the room across from him, as he was coming out of the

building.

"Darius let me in. I thought I would come over and cook dinner for you, Mr. I Sleep All Damn Day. Have you found a job yet?"

Uh. He hated it when she started a conversation like that.

"No...Not exactly. I borrowed rent for next month against my credit. I plan on getting up early tomorrow and starting back out."

She seemed less than thrilled, but asked him how spaghetti sounded.

"It sounds great," he said. Actually, upon first awakening, he usually had no appetite at all. She sat down beside him on the bed, and hugged him close to her.

"You wouldn't believe the dream I just had," he said, reaching over for his glasses.

"Yeah", she said, half-interested. "What was it like?"

"I was in heaven--or, something. And I was talking to the spirit of Merrick."

"Who?"

"Um, the Elephant Man. Who I'm writing the novel about."

'Oh. Well, it serves you right. You think about that weird stuff all the time. No wonder you have strange dreams."

He stretched and yawned.

"Yeah, but it almost didn't *feel* like a dream. It felt real, like I was actually there. He said the strangest things."

"What sort of things?" Now, he could tell, she was really zoning out. She did that whenever he said anything that made her uneasy.

"Oh, just that--nothing, really." He decided to change the subject.

"Anyway," she said, getting up from the bed with the same spring of energy with which she did almost everything. "Get cleaned up--I'm going to cook you the best spaghetti dinner in the entire world. And then we're going job-hunting, dear."

He smiled. He liked it, secretly, when she told him what to do. It made things so much easier for him.

He got up and walked around the room a bit, trying to adjust to being awake. It made him feel good to hear her cluttering around in the kitchen, occasionally talking to him, but concentrating chiefly on making him a delicious meal, on making him happy. Not a lot in this world made him happy.

Here, in this tiny room, were all of his worldly possessions. Many books: horror and science fiction novels, books on the occult and UFOs, and comic books. His stereo and computer were the only appliances he owned, and one rather went with the other, as far as he was concerned.

He turned on some music; he had abandoned *Nick Cave* lately for *Clannad*, liking the Irish folksiness of some of the songs. Ah, such manufactured melancholy.

He sat at his computer, and looked at his writing. Already what he had was more than enough, but he felt trapped. He hoped that what he had, so far, would be coherent enough, and flow together somewhat. The story in his head was often a collection of strange, half-realized notions, and he knew that, sometimes, it could be quite hard for some people to grasp.

He thought back to his dream. Merrick had told him he needed to change something--well, here was criticism from a strange source! He wondered exactly what the dream meant, and felt the first few stirrings of uneasiness inside of himself. Uneasiness that, perhaps, something in his subconscious was trying to tell him that his novel was in danger of going into strange, uncharted territory.

"Tom? Tom, I told you to be cleaned up. We're going to have to go out and try and find you some work." he could hear her in the kitchen stirring spaghetti sauce. Her voice sounded a tad frustrated.

"Yeah, honey, I know. Just wanted to look at something." She walked back into his room.

"Well, you can look at it later. Here, how does this taste."

She held the spoon out for him to try it. A mushroom still clung, precariously, to the end. He ate, and liked. In spite of his early-morning reluctance to eat.

"I love it. You are the best cook a man could ask for." He wanted to press her closely to himself, but she pulled back a little.

"Not *now*," she said. "You're still icky. Go shower, then we'll see." she rubbed his arm a little, and hurried back into the kitchen.

He thought, *so I am lucky in one way, at least.*

They had driven around afterwards, for a few hours, and then she had told him goodnight. It was bright and early to work for her tomorrow morning. "And besides," she said, "you know what they say about absence."

"Yeah," he had retorted. "But that's just a bunch of bullshit. When you're not around, I usually just think about golf."

"You're full of shit, Tom."

"I know. I cannot help it. It's the way that God made me."

She frowned.

"Don't blame God for the fact that you're full of shit. It's just that brain of yours. It's warped. Face it, Baker; you're a product of your environment, pure and simple."

"Oh, you've got me all figured out, I guess." He smiled. My, how beautiful she looked, standing out here in the moonlight, in front of his house. Auburn hair, long eyelashes, and wonderful full lips.

In addition, she could not have been more than five feet tall. She was the perfect height, really. He suddenly grabbed her close, and kissed her. And this time, she did not pull away.

"Mmm..." she said. "I liked that. Do you have anymore?"

He did.

She was gone before he woke up that morning. He suddenly wondered if it had been the right thing. Then, if you never took a chance in life, you never lived.

Alex Mona

Alex Mona was a large fellow, and very intelligent, although his appearance gave him something of the look of an overgrown teddy bear.

Tom had met him several years back; they hailed from the same hometown, and it had been only accidental that they had decided to attend the same university. Muncie held an absurd attraction to youth from surrounding areas that were even smaller.

Mona had excellent academic credentials; he was well educated, had graduated with honors, and was already teaching by the time Tom had finally managed to wrestle his degree away from the English Department. Mona was the picture of an upstanding citizen; careful and circumspect in all of his conversations. Tom admired him.

Until, that is, Mona had tried to steal his girlfriend.

It had happened gradually, in a way that was too subtle for even Tom (who was usually more or less suspicious of everyone) to see it. Mona had started by making little dates with her when Tom was too busy with writing or working. It had been just chatting over coffee.

Now, something strange had started to transpire between Crystal and him. Nights together, spent watching television or simply laying in each other's arms, had considerably decreased. She was always "too-busy" herself, or too tired. He had not thought anything of it at first, but then it began to eat at him somewhat. What was she doing? Who was she with? He did not, at the time, know the answer to those questions.

Mona had twice managed to frighten him, in the space of their acquaintance. The first time had been a trip to Ft. Wayne, to see a rock group that both of them were eager to watch, a holdover from a childhood obsession with music that had sustained both of them through the torments and tortures of high school. Mona had insisted upon arriving very early; they had made a time of simply walking around town, looking seedy and

"punk".

"Hey," he had suggested. "Do you want to go and check out the biggest man-built bridge in the United States?"

Tom had readily agreed. It would be several hours yet before the show was set to begin.

They had driven down Indiana back roads till nearly dusk; it was a bewildering ride, and, oddly, it seemed to grow silent the farther along it progressed. Mona's face had taken on an odd cast that Tom had not liked, and he had insisted that they drive back into the city.

He had dismissed that incident, as a symptom of his own paranoia.

The other time had been very recently. Mona had read his first book through, was one of the few people that Tom knew was qualified to give criticism about it. They had spent what amounted to a day together, and had finished by simply walking around downtown Muncie, looking at the historical architecture.

He had introduced him to Crystal that night, having stopped by her apartment to say hello. They had exchanged numbers, Tom thought innocently. They were going to discuss graduate classes.

Finally, Alex had suggested that they go for a ride.

"Look at these houses. They do not build them like that anymore. It's a symptom of a decline in culture." Tom looked at the past with a kind of empty, romantic reverence. My! How he would have liked, himself, live in one of those houses.

Mona seemed just the opposite.

"Well, I mean, if you think about it, most of these big old Victorians were built by people who had an unfair advantage in the class struggle. They were from old-money families that exploited the common laborers."

I forgot Alex was a raving Communist. Oh boy. He should know about the common laborer.

"Hey, why don't we go check out some of the houses

farther out? I know of a row of really old, beautiful places in the country a bit."

Tom had thought nothing of it. It was a nice night, and he still had energy and frustration to burn.

They had driven a little way out of Muncie, and suddenly turned off onto an old dirt road. It was then that something in Tom's interior make-up started screaming.

Why, all of a sudden, do I feel very uneasy? Where out in the middle of nowhere. In addition, how much do I really know about Mona? This situation feels as strange as the last time we went driving together.

Tom looked over at Alex. His face had taken on a very peculiar, *intent* look; he seemed like he was somewhere far away, and that there was someone else operating his hands, controlling the vehicle.

"Uh, Alex, it's getting late. We can always look at them some other time."

"Oh. Oh, sure." He seemed to snap back to reality for a moment.

"I guess I do have a lot to do tomorrow. Busy man, you know. I'm about to complete my Masters in English."

They made their way quickly back to Riverside Avenue. As Tom made his way up the stairs, he had a gradual, uneasy feeling that seemed to take hold of him, and refused to let go.

How much did he know about Mona? This same situation has happened twice now, and both times he had felt the first few stirrings of panic hit him, for no apparent reason. It had never happened with anyone else he had been in a car with.

How much did he know about Mona?

He was afraid, suddenly...

Crystal, Again

"I don't think you take our relationship seriously enough. Alex says that commitment is the most important part of a relationship."

She was fixing her hair in the bathroom mirror. He could

have twisted her head off.

"Yeah, well I guess Alex would know. He's never had a girlfriend in his life."

She smirked. "Oh," she said, "I don't believe that at all. He is very sensitive to women. You could take some lessons from him."

"Hey, I am a very sensitive individual. Just ask anyone---"

"Actually, everyone says you're a bitter, morose creep. I still love you..."

He knew that there was something more coming.

"You still love me, but? What?"

She stopped to pull some hair from her brush. She took the offending hairball and cast it into the wastebasket. Then she got up and walked over to her closet. She began to fish through her collection of tops. What was she getting ready for?

"Uh, which one do you like better? The blue or the red?"

He did not particularly care at this point. He had suddenly realized that she was going off somewhere. In addition, since she had not specified for him to dress up, he had a good idea that she was going to be going alone.

"Yeah, well. I suppose it's you and he tonight than, isn't it? Have fun."

She began to hum to herself.

"Plan on it."

He suddenly wanted to yell a string of filthy names at her. Instead, he said, "This hurts me. This hurts me a lot, and you know it. And you don't care."

She turned on him, suddenly.

"Quit being a big baby Tom. You want to pull this guilt-trip shit with me. Well, it is not going to work. If anyone should feel guilty, it is you. Do you know what it is like to be in a relationship with you? It is exhausting. All you do is take, take, *take*---"

Now he did feel guilty. He could see why he had managed to drive her away. He was constantly mired in his own gloom anymore, and when he was not, he was in his private world of

Merrick, Jack the Ripper, and strange phantasmal "bedroom invaders". He felt, all of a sudden, incredibly ashamed.

"I don't mean to be this way. If you do this to me, I don't know how I'm going to make it."

"Do--*what?*" she had asked. "I'm *trying* to get ready."

He had left then. He walked from downtown, back across the bridge, and felt like all the world was a heavy boot that would not quit kicking him, and he had lost his last true friend.

Portrait of His World

He had no idea what to do with himself *now*.

He gradually began to see less and less of her, and the nights had started to become a torture. He could never sleep, never finish reading a book, and his writing had suffered.

How to finish it? It cannot be done. Have I written forty thousand words---for nothing?

He had left Merrick with the shattering knowledge that Treves was, indeed, Jack the Ripper. Of course, his Merrick was not the *real* Merrick: his Merrick seemed much more articulate than the real Merrick had probably been. In addition, his Treves far less professional, and bordering on neurotic.

Several times, he had caught himself making mistakes: Merrick could not *possibly* have looked "grief-stricken", for Merrick could not possibly have conveyed human emotions through the macabre disfigurement of his face.

Have I done it correctly? Have I accurately conveyed how hideously ugly he was, and juxtaposed it against his warmth, his child-like nature, and his gentle humanity? I hope that I have not actually degraded his memory, somehow.

He thought about the various novels he had read which might, also, be considered "historical fantasy". Wonderful Sherlock Holmes pastiche by Nicholas Myers, and a smashing novel that put Edgar Allen Poe and Davy Crockett together to solve a mystery. What was the name of that one? Ah yes, *Nevermore*, by the crime writer Harold Scechter.

He had felt a white-hot moment of embarrassment, right after he wrote the second scene in the tub room. He felt that, maybe, he had gone too far with that.

He remembered reading Bernard Pomerance's play *The Elephant Man*, when he was around twelve. At twelve, he knew that he was already born to be a bookworm, and spent many hours being babysat by the Marion Public Library while his mother was at work. It was something Merrick and he had in common.

However, nothing else. I could never match the gentleness of that soul. It is beyond me. For all he suffered he was as docile as a baby lamb. My life has been far better, and most of the time I feel like a roaring lion.

In Pomerance's play, there had been a scene with the actress Madge Kendall. Kendall, in real life had never met Merrick. However, she wrote to him often, sent him gifts, and arranged for his holiday at Fawsley and his trip to the theatre to see the Christmas Pantomime. In Pomerance's *Elephant Man*, Madge Kendall suddenly bares her naked breast to Merrick in his private rooms. They are interrupted by Treves, who demands that she leave at once. No good tempting him with something he can never have, Pomerance had seemed to be suggesting.

Of course, it had stuck in his mind--any discussion about Merrick also had to deal with his amorous tendencies, which, of course, remained sadly unfulfilled. In addition, Hildy Watkins must have just been some Freudian character. It was all a part of his bloody castration fantasy.

I am deconstructing my own novel. I have had too many bloody English classes.

Night after night, he sat at the keyboard, unable to move, unable to type. Thinking the same thoughts, and wondering if she would ever come back to him.

It had been a Thursday, when she had finally called and told him she was seeing somebody else.

"Alex, huh? You're leaving me for Alex."

She was silent, and then said:

"I knew that you'd hate me, forever. I didn't know how to tell you."

He felt his spirits nose-dive. He had actually been almost happy today.

"Well--I hope this is what you really want. I do not know what happened to us. Everything was fine until he showed up. I love you--"

Her voice was very chill, very icy.

"Don't sound so upset, Mr. Machine. I know you don't feel much except for doom and gloom---"

"Crystal--"

"No--it's true: you're a damn sulking machine. Anyway, I am sorry Tom. That's that."

"Yeah. Guess so."

Click.

Therefore, here he sat, alone once more, with nothing but memories to keep him company. Memories and his novel. His life was, after all, an incredible sigh.

He had cried, at first. It had seemed appropriate. Now, he simply spent the spare hours when he was not looking for work staring off into a space that he did not understand because so many things had simply failed to make any sense to him whatsoever.

It was at the Village Coffee, later, when he had run into Mona that he first got an inkling that a problem was going to develop.

Obsession, Possession, and Distraction

He was becoming obsessed, taken with the idea of his novel, which had petered out after a mere 43, 000 words.

He had no idea how to finish it. It was becoming his own personal battle. A struggle within that threatened to make him

physically ill.

Am I writing something of value? How do I explain this piece to the reading public? How do I justify it?

He knew his obsessing was pointless; the piece was beautiful exactly as it was--with perhaps a rewrite or two to make it flow more with the historical facts.

He would sit in his room, night after impoverished night, staring into the darkness that seemed to threaten to envelop the world. Where was there to turn?

He would look at Howell and Ford's book, *The True History of the Elephant Man*, and would wonder if he had, truly, painted a portrait of Merrick that would contend with the others that had been rendered in plays, poems, and cinema. It was maddening, this novel.

No one understands us, the worlds "freaks". We are many and silent, lab rats in the maze of an angry God.

Mona had approached him at Village Coffee, where he had been sitting talking with Craig Black and his girlfriend Marlene. He had ridden up on his bicycle, while they had been sitting at the cafe tables outside, being college bums.

"Hey, Tom. How have you been?"

Tom paused for a moment, and then looked up with a feeling of bile rising to the back of his throat.

"What's going on Alex?"

Mona acted as if nothing was remiss. As if he had not been fondling Tom's ex-girlfriend for one many nights now.

"Oh, well, I have just been working on my graduate work. Things have been dull lately. Have I met your friends?"

"No, I don't believe so. This is Craig, and Marlene---his girlfriend." Tom thought I use to be able to introduce my girlfriend, until you came along.

"Nice to meet you guys. Hey, Tom, you're weird--what do you know about Joseph Mengele?"

Everyone at the table stiffened a little. It was not really the

topic, but Tom had related to them the story of the strange car rides he had taken with Mona. Suddenly, an ambulance blew past, stifling conversation under a blanket of screeching siren.

"I just read an article about how they're building a McDonalds at Dachau," Craig said, and Tom didn't know if he was joking or not. Craig was large loud, dressed in black, and gregarious as hell. A great spirit.

"No shit," Tom hissed.

"I know," said Marlene. "Sick isn't it. I got the article out of a magazine and saved it--of course, *he* had to spend twenty minutes making jokes about it."

"Hey, Marlene, gimme a break, I have to laugh to keep from slaughtering nine year olds." Craig stopped to yell "slaughtering nine year olds" one more time as a very respectable-looking older couple entered the coffee house.

"Oh *Craig!*" Marlene hissed, and gave him a good-natured slap.

"Why, may I ask," Tom began slowly, "are you all of a sudden interested in Mengele?"

"Well, I saw this special on Nazi Doctors--I taped it. I was just wondering, you know, since you are *dark--*" Mona said the last part as if he was laughing inside. Tom wanted to get up and kick him, but then Tom just was not the type.

"Uh, um, not really that dark right now. I guess---"

"I just sort of wondered what kind of a person it takes to do the things that Mengele did. You know, like, using German shepherds to rape people. God, the Right can be so cruel."

Yeah Alex, you are correct. Furthermore, when are you going to throw over the faux Bolshevism and join the G.O.P.?

Well, I must go. I have a lot to catch up on. See ya, wouldn't wanna be ya"

Mona rode away, a giant two hundred and fifty pound teddy bear riding a ten-speed bicycle, complete with bikers helmet and knee pads. He looked as odd and stilted as his conversation.

Marlene shivered.

"He's weird. If she left you for that guy, you're better off, Tom."

"Yeah, dude, they're perfect together. She's tornado-bait, and he's the Mad Marxist. They sound like a WWF tag team."

Tom laughed, hard. It helped dispel the pain. And the creeping feeling that Mona's presence invariably left. He thought, not for the first time, that there had to be some dark undercurrent to Mona's socially respectable exterior.

Then, he noticed the hundredth pretty co-ed walk by, waving her hips, with long hair braided and sandals flopping against the sidewalk. He wondered why God gifted only a few with perfect bodies. Then, he dreamed.

It was in the Wonderland Bookstore where he sat and talked science fiction with his friend the owner, Captain Dee.

"Hey Cap, did those *Dark Shadows* cards ever come in?"

Cap shook his great shaggy head sadly.

"No, sorry. Not yet, but I do have some new stuff upstairs in Ufo's."

"You always know what I like, don't you Cap?"

"Hey, you're my best customer. Would you expect anything less, from one dork to another?" Cap tipped back in his chair and crossed his arms. Wonderland Books was a veritable treasure trove of misspent youth: comic books, pulp thrillers, trading cards, and every conceivable horror and science fiction book you could ever dream of owning. Moreover, Cap presided over his kingdom with an almost academic knowledge. It probably came from growing up fat.

"Lemme see...I think today, um. Oh, wow, you have Universal Monsters cards."

"Yep! About half a set. Take a look at this here---" And he reached across the front counter into the card trays and pulled out a thick handful between thumb and forefinger.

"The art on some of these is not real good--but see, I love what they did with the Gill Man." Dee proudly held up a trading

card painting of the monster from the classic movie Creature of the Black Lagoon.

"Oh, man, look at that--it's beautiful." Tom moaned. Pickman often told him he sounded like he was looking at pornography when he was sizing up a comic book, classic pulp fiction book, or trading card.

"Yep, they really did a good job with that one. Oh, these are great. You know, Hollywood just has not turned out a great monster since the seventies. Remember Sammy Terry?"

Tom nodded. Sammy had been one of his favorites.

"I am actually doing a bit of research. I have been combing the old tee vee guides. Do you know why?"

Tom shrugged, but he had a good idea.

"I'm trying to make an archive of all the films ever shown on the old Sammy Terry show. So far, I've gotten everything, nearly, from the eighties. You know me, Overdork, always compiling, lists. See--" He held it up and proceeded to flip the pages.

Tom was stunned. The man had an entire spiral bound notebook filled with the movies shown on the late-night horror host's show. Several years' worth of the program schedule.

"Dude, I bow to you. Dee, why don't they make 'em the way they use to?"

"What? Trading cards?"

"No, monsters. All the great monsters are gone: Boris, Bela, and Lon Chaney--all gone." Tom looked sadly through the trading card set, handed them carefully to Dee, and pulled out his wallet.

"I'll take these." He had picked about four or five.

"Okay. That will be, lemme see, let's just say two. For my best customer." He handed Dee two dollars, and pocketed the cards.

Dee brushed his long hair out of his eyes and said, "yeah, but I know what you mean. But, you have to look at the bright side: at least there's a guy like me to keep the flame of the classic monsters alive. I sell people their childhoods back man, that's

ninety percent of my business."

"Hell yeah, Dee. Everytime I come in here, I leave feeling like an idiot because I pissed away money on something I don't need. But it's like the years disappear when I have this horror and sci-fi stuff all around me. It's like my life."

He smiled. He looked a little like a giant panda.

"Yep. I'm not a movie director, or a writer, but, I guess, in my own way, I'm still selling people their dreams."

"Yeah...except mine are full of monsters."

Monsters...

It was at least two weeks later that he heard about the first murders.

The Great Unraveling

The first murder had happened in Bloomington. A university freshman had been kidnapped while walking to her car from a party only a block away. The body had been found only a week later, stuffed into a drainage culvert, mutilated, but, apparently, without any sexual molestation. The intestines had been ripped apart.

The police had no clues, no suspects. Tom scarcely took any notice of it, except for the fact that it bore a slight resemblance to the murders he had recently been writing about in his novel.

The next one had been in Ft. Wayne. The press had started talking about a "serial killer". This one had been dumped in an alley, mutilated savagely, sexual organs slashed. The press said she had been a stripper. Well, now a ripper had stripped her.

He was becoming more and more conscious of a similarity in every press report he read. The killer had apparently fired some half-coherent missive at the police. They felt that he was trying to hide the fact that he was intelligent. It read, in part, "...I am not dun yet I will wate a whil longer I will next time take a trophy to

send luv." It was almost exactly the Ripper, and Tom felt chilled upon reading the second murder report.

Well, these people are real. I cannot expect murderers and monsters to stay in fiction, where it is safe.

Nevertheless, he kept thinking about the location of the first murder. Bloomington. Alex liked to go to Bloomington, didn't he? He shook the half-developed thought from his mind. It was too fantastic. It was a plot for a novel.

He had given up on his. It would, he expected, be relegated to the dustbins with everything else he ever attempted of any great length. It was his fatal flaw, a lack of ambition.

Sigh.

When the third body was discovered in Muncie, however, he figured he might be able to write an ending after all.

She had been abducted and stabbed to death, and then dumped rather unceremoniously on a country back road. It had been a university co-ed, a pretty brunette, and now the campus area was bracing itself with a wave of paranoia.

The local women's groups held candlelight vigils, and a march against domestic violence transpired down University, but Tom couldn't see where in the hell they got off comparing the two. It didn't matter, anyway. It was the eyewitness description of the man that the victim was last seen talking to that really interested him.

Medium height. Brown hair. Heavy set. Clean-cut. This was the description of an anonymous tipster to the police, as given in the Muncie Star. There was one more item of description: brown beard. Yes, he admitted to himself, it was very vague. Yes, there were a thousand people that could possibly fit that description. Nevertheless, that still did not change the one undeniable fact that Tom knew, deep in his heart.

The killer was Alex Mona.

That night he dreamt about women.

Short women, young women, old women, sexy slender women with great beak-like noses, and little Spanish mommas missing teeth. Some of the women were deformed, untouchable. In his dream he had slipped back through the years, until he was a little Tom, playing games with the girls, happy and content as ever to be in the presence of innocence and joy.

He was desperately, hopelessly confused. Could reality, somehow, actually be effected by the fantasies of a novelist? To cause a sort of crossover?

There was little similarity, he felt, besides the fact that he was becoming, increasingly, certain that Alex Mona, who had made off like a veritable bandit with the one prize of his life, was actually responsible for the deaths of at least three people. Was that the meaning behind these strange, dream-visitations from the purported soul of Merrick? He was, obviously, not in his rational mind any longer.

He walked the streets of Muncie in a daze.

His friends were little help to him, and as sunset painted University Ave. in long, pastel shades, he felt as if he was seriously in danger of becoming unhinged, for the first time in over a decade.

Alone, he sat in his little boarding-house room and looked at walls that had been built when Merrick, the Ripper, and Treves still walked the earth. What kind of a world was it, where something that men had created to house their bodies could long outlast them?

He sat at the keyboard, night after night, wishing for a miracle, and knowing that there was no ending to the situation that he had created and pieced together on paper. He was not sure where to turn. Moreover, steadily he was beginning to panic.

He slept.

In his dream, he was at the Drury Lane Theatre. It was the Christmas pantomime *Puss in Boots*, the one that Merrick loved so

well. According to Treves famous account, the theatrical fantasy had been almost real to him. Well, dreams could come true, after all. He understood when he found himself seated in a far theatre box, and flanked by Treves and several obvious attendants.

He was sitting in Merrick's seat.

He sat enraptured for a moment, entranced by the gala spectacle unfolding on the stage below. It was a remarkable exposition of stagecraft and costuming, performed with a delicacy of balance, an attention ion to the minutia of detail, and a true understanding of all that constituted spectacle, in every sense of the word.

Then, one of the actors moving about the stage stopped suddenly, out of step with the rest of the pageant. He suddenly looked directly up at the box, and began to float from the stage. Gracefully, he climbed over the audience, and suddenly alighted on the balcony edge. Tom looked up. He knew the handsome features and the dark hair well.

"I see we meet again," he said. "Is this the place where there is no darkness?"

The figure jumped down into Treves lap. Treves seemed to take no notice.

"No, but I promise you we will meet there, someday. Your novel, Tom. You cannot leave the situation the way it is. I think you're beginning to understand the consequences of your actions."

"Yes. Nevertheless, how does it end? Does any of it ever end? And when do I stop being Merrick?"

The figure crouched on Treves lap; low, imp-like, he seemed less altogether good in this dream.

"Who knows, but God? Maybe now, maybe yesterday, maybe tomorrow---who knows? Ah, but one man does know."

"Who?"

"You know Tom. Finish it. Finish it."

And his eyes grew black with rage, and his voice was a roaring drone.

Joseph, Alone

It had taken nearly an hour to explain it to him, but Dick Neville was finally beginning to understand.

It had been several days since the last visitation, but Merrick knew now, in his heart of hearts, that the Shadow was no mere illusion of his dreaming mind. The Shadow was as real as old Dick, who was sitting looking at him, aghast.

"Bloody hell, Merrick. Do you even know what the hell your saying?"

It had been rough going, so far. Dick could not understand him the way, well, the way *Freddy* could. He had been forced to grab pen and just write, in a very quick, dirty scrawl, the thing that he knew he had to do.

"Your telling *me*, Dick Neville, that *Frederick Treves*, our Chief of Surgery is--Merrick, you're out of your fucking mind!" Neville threw the paper at Merrick angrily, and began to pace the room.

Merrick blubbered something that Neville had to strain to understand.

"Please," he had said," you do not understand. Even I do not, fully. But I know that I have to do this, and you were introduced into the situation yourself for just this specific reason--"

"No. No. No." He crossed his arms, bowed his head, and shook it angrily.

"It is true. Please, I do not have the capacity to explain to you how or why, but you must trust me. Listen, do you think this is some fantasy that I concocted? Freddy is my dearest friend in the world--he was my salvation when I could have just as easily died in the gutters. But, there is a great evil--eating up the world--and the burden has fallen to me to carry."

Neville had barely comprehended what he had just said, but inside of himself, he nearly saw the logic of it. Treves was a brilliant anatomist. So, apparently, according to the police, was the

Ripper. Treves worked in the heart of Dicks own Whitechapel home, and he always gave the appearance of being above even the most trifling of suspicions about any of his activities. Dick had, long ago, learned to distrust anyone that came off as being such a model of moral rectitude. Moreover, why would Merrick want to lay the finger of guilt upon his best friend?

"I hope you know that if anyone finds out about this little jaunt, I'll be sacked quicker than I can crack a grin. This is lunacy. I do not even believe I am standing here right now listening to this drivel. But, I can see in your eyes that you are square, and I have always liked you, Merrick. You really are as holy as you seem, I sometimes think.

"I shall go and fetch you a cab. I will not go with you, and if bloody Treves wants to know how in the hell you made it to his house, you are not to even let on that I was even in your room tonight. I will deny everything. Nevertheless, I will fetch a cab, and try to explain to him, somehow. I wish somebody would explain all this to me"

In addition, he exited the sitting room quietly, stealing out through the square, looking about nervously, like a character in a novel. Merrick knelt at his bedside.

"Lord, I do not understand exactly why it is I am always afflicted with so much trouble and turmoil...I know that all things work together for good to them that love you. But, as I go forth to do that which you have ordained for me, please, keep the hand that protects upon me. I do not know what it is I am facing, but I know that Satan has sent his angel into my life to tear asunder the goodness that you have built there.

"But Lord, if it is your will that I be struck down tonight, and die--then know that I accept your will with a clean heart, and a courageous one...but, do me one favor, I have not asked much. If what I suspect of Treves is true, then, all I can ask is that you have mercy on his soul. Because, as human beings, that is all that we can ever ask of you....or anyone else, for all that. Amen.

He got up slowly, knowing such fear as he hadn't felt in almost two years. He walked over to the coat hooks, where he kept his hood, and cloak, and took them slowly down. They still stank of the Continent, and putting them on anymore always made him a little queasy with memories of his past. However, tonight, they were as indispensable as his comfortable old cane. He hobbled over to the window and looked out, catching his reflection.

Here he was, all that the world wanted of him. Veiled--going forth in the night to do the work of the Lord.

Neville had rapped sharply at the door, and Merrick had just as quickly answered. "It seems we are in luck. The cabbie 'appened to be one of my best mates. Are you ready, Joe Merrick? He's waiting out on Oxford, and it's a long drive."

Merrick made sure to grab two things: primarily, his Bible, and, secondly, his portrait of Mary Jane. He hoped it would be enough.

"Yes. I am ready. God bless you Dick."

"He's done a spotty job of that so far. But, now--off. And, just you remember, never tell anyone I even saw you tonight."

Merrick went through the door, and out into the alleyway. Bedstead was a monument of desolation at this hour, but he could hear, another street down, the sounds of a drunken woman singing. It was a popular tune, but he did not fancy the words. It was called "A Violet I Plucked from Mother's Grave when but a Boy." It was on every drunken tongue these past few weeks.

He walked past the hospital garden, talking in the aroma of flowers, not knowing if he would ever sit there again in the relative tranquility of the night and dream a dream of beautiful women. However, he could not think of that right now. Now, his most pressing concern was to board the cab up ahead, and to get to the Treves home. To, by the will of God he hoped, save his dearest friend.

Childe of Shadows, Childe of Light

As the cab let him off in front, Merrick made his way heavily to the gate. All inside was darkness. No light, not even the flicker of a candle, could be seen coming from the windows. The driver helped him, gingerly, from the cab, and Merrick hoped that Neville had not expected him to be able to pay the fare.

He almost started to speak, but the cabbie said, "No charge, not for you, Mr. Merrick. Dick has told me all about it. I hope the good doctor can do something about your back. Lord knows mine sure enough gives me 'ell. Do you need some 'elp to the door?"

Merrick thanked him as best he was able, and told him, carefully, that that would not be necessary. The driver wished him a good morning, and climbing back to his seat, rattled off down the road, his horses blowing mist in the chilly October air.

He walked to the gate, knowing it would be easily passable to him. It was, as he had anticipated, unlocked. He shuffled, bearing the heavy burden of his body down the dark length of the yard, and ascending to the front porch. He was, for a moment, perplexedly unsure of what he should do.

I should never have come here. What if I am wrong? Perhaps I am just a silly child, making fantasies into reality, just as Freddy accused me of doing when I talked of mother. I wish I could simply walk down the street, hail another cab, and go back home.

However, he knew there was no turning back now. He was trapped. He grasped the door handle and turned, slowly.

Inside, darkness. He strained to see, by the trickling moonlight that crept in through the filmy sash. If he was wrong, then the Treves would be upstairs, in bed, and Freddy would scold him as he had never before done. It would be a real mess, and a complete embarrassment. He crept forward.

Now, finally, objects were becoming clear in the relative gloom. The elegant furnishings, the expensive rugs, and the

assortment of family portraits upon the mantle were becoming as clear as the relative layout, which he remembered from his previous visit. Now, for the decisive moment.

He walked through the sitting room, and into Freddy's study. No sign of life. The house seemed as empty and still as the leather sofa that he knew Freddy reclined upon during moments of great mental exertion. He clutched his Bible tighter.

He made a short examination of the study, and walked back out, coming to the foot of the stairs. Suddenly, he saw a small, winking light flicker against the wall. It was a solitary candle, guttering in a draft of breeze that must have been coming in through a partly open window. Suddenly, the light revealed a shadow. A dark silhouette had come and stood at the top of the staircase, looking down at him. It was familiar, wearing a tall, gentlemanly hat and holding something that Merrick was fairly certain must be one of Freddy's long, bone-handled postmortem blades. The figure regarded him for a moment then turned and disappeared again, back into the gloom.

Merrick trembled with fear, began to pray, silently---desperately. He began to ascend the staircase, slowly.

He had entered the master bedroom, and seen him sitting at his wife's mirror. Merrick crept through the open door, his cane beating a sharp tap against the floorboards. The figure's head turned slowly, and met Merrick's gaze.

The face was a comic mask. It was not Treves, Merrick realized, almost with a sense of elation, but some foul *other*, some thing that had stolen him. Its grimace was a gross and deformed as Merrick's own mouth, and the eyes were pitch black, through and through. It was a nightmare-thing. Blood trickled down from both corners of the mouth, where Merrick realized that the creature had bitten its own tongue, savagely.

"Hello," it droned, in a voice that had seemed to lose all inflection or any aspect of what a normal voice should be.

"It is very good of you to come, Elephant Man. My but I

am very satisfied that, here, in this last-minute stage, we can dispense with any illusions. Tut tut, cat got your tongue. Well, now we are truly brothers. Two old freaks, just waiting for a curtain call. They call me Saucy Jack. *Saucy*." He said the last word with mocking relish.

"I don't know what you are. However--I know what you are not. You are not Frederick Treves. You have stolen his image and distorted it. You have made a mockery of him."

Merrick suddenly reached up and pulled off his hood, casting it to the ground.

The figure rose suddenly, and started to skulk closer. Merrick could see that, clenched tightly in one hand, he still held the post-mortem knife. Now, the alien visage was towering over him, and fear made him feel as if he was going to weep. Where was he to make for, now?

"I do not have to be terrified of you," he said, "because the Lord is with me.' He makes me down to lie in pastures green, he restoreth my soul. Yea though I walk through the valley---"

"Quiet."

"...Of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod, and thy staff, they comfort me--"

"Quiet!"

Silence. Then, "I don't need to hear your mystical chants, I happen to have my own. Let me tell you of the genius that you see in the making. I have come to realize, my friend, that life is, truly, the hideous and crawling thing that you yourself know it to be, deep down. Remember the Liecester Union Workhouse? Do you remember how they thrashed you?"

Merrick answered, almost involuntarily, "yes."

"It was I, I who was thrashing you. And do you remember how your father beat you when you spent the money you made hawking the town for a little food for your repulsive belly? Well, his fists were my fists. And your stepmother, and Ferrari, and every woman that ever shrieked as she beheld your sordid frame.

"They were all me. I am one now, with all monstrosities

that ever erupted from the womb of womankind. I am an acidic belly, a starving child, and a murdered whore."

Merrick refused to be cowed. He could feel virtue rally within him. He was brave, damnit, and he would be damned if he let Hell's angel just take him.

"I cast you out, unclean spirit. In the name of Jesus, who died for the sins of the world." Merrick knew he was sputtering; he had meant to sound bold, but with it towering above him, blowing the reek of death in his face, he had again lost the courage that virtue afforded him.

It moved slowly away from him, turning its back and walking to the far side of the room, slowly. It laughed a chuckle that held as much pleasure in its sound as the crack of a broken leg, and said "Very well. I can see you need some convincing. It is in my power to offer you one thing, and one thing only so that you may, truly, see."

Merrick was now lost in a total state of confusion, and was very near panic. He had not been able to drive the low spirit away, even in the name of Christ. If his religion was no good, he thought madly, then what, at this point, did he truly have?

"I can offer you all the lusts of your heart---I can offer you the one thing you would never, in your life, be able to obtain. I, Freddy Treves, who have already given you so much---now I offer you the ultimate gift. I once lamented that I could not cure you. Well, as you can now see, that situation has been, thankfully, put to right. Look---

And he had raised one bony finger, and pointed to Anne's mirror. Merrick looked, and was, momentarily, so stunned he completely forgot where he was. The vision he beheld in the mirror was one that, even he, never dreamed was possible.

Standing in his outdoor cloak was another man altogether. A dark-haired young man of twenty-five odd years, with a beautiful head, a handsome jaw, and wonderful, striking blue eyes. There was no hint of a tumor, not the merest suggestion of rough, deformed skin, of any grotesque swelling. He realized that

this was the Merrick that might have been; this was a vision of a perfect body. This was the curse, lifted.

He turned, and asked, quietly, 'you could do that. You could, really, do that?'

It laughed the same miserable hum that it had emitted earlier.

"Yes, I am in charge of all things. I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, and this is the *Kali-Yuga*. This is the age of shadows. Take my offer. Don't be afraid. We have always been friends, you and I"

Joseph could feel the vibrations of unholy fury emanating off of this thing that stood before him. Suddenly, he was no longer standing in the Treves home, neither of them stood there now. Now, it was the Great Cathedral, and everything that was happening was happening on some level of allegory. Joseph knew he was going to be cast as a bloody saint, but, damn, it would be wonderful to take the devils bargain being offered...

"I can't...I can't let you get away with it you know. I can't let you...history would not forgive us. We are always going to be opposite sides of the same coin...we are balance. Now--release the man you've taken possession of. Or--"

The figure that crouched before him laughed. It seemed to crouch like some malignant spider, seemed to flow across the floorboards like an inky stain. Suddenly, it erupted in a solid cloud of black. And when the cloud dissolved, Joseph could see, now, the true nature of the beast.

He had seen this evil before. Hissing snake hairs, like Medusa. He knew it as Void; it ate souls. It was death.

"Now...fucker. We will see whose flesh is up to the challenge."

And the thing flew blew forward like smoke, and enveloped him. For his part, Merrick put every ounce of strength into grappling with the tenuous strings of ectoplasm that filtered like wet cloth through his fingers. Suddenly, those strands became strips of flesh. And they began to grow into him.

His flesh. Its flesh. One flesh. All of it--the tumors, the reptile skin, the butchered organs, the ginny bits of kidney--all of it began to grow, to pulsate upon them as they writhed together. Gross monsters caught in an absurd ballet. Suffocation beneath mountains of flesh. Finally, there was nothing left but the pale ghosts of spirits trying to fight their way upward, to God, to Universal Consciousness, like drowning women. They were supplicants in the temple of skin. It was the greatest of all struggles; the war to defeat yourself.

The Faerie Queen

And, for thou wast a spirit too delicate
To act her earthy and abhorr'd commands,
Refusing her grand hests, she did contain thee,
By help of her most unmitigable rage,
Into a cloven pine; within which rift
Imprison'd thou didst painfully remain,
A dozen years; within which space she died
And left thee there; where thou didst vent thy
groans
As fast as mill-wheels strike. Then was this island---
Save for the son she littered here,

A freckled whelp, hag-born---not honored with
A human shape.

---William Shakespeare,
The Tempest

Alex was an excellent driver.

She tussled the hair on the back of his neck. So, he was a little overweight, it was no problem. He was a *man*. She needed his power, his successes, his self-assurances. She was tired of being a nurse-maid to grown men.

Tom sat at the keyboard, knowing, in his heart, that something terrible was about to happen. He realized now that he had written it into the fabric of reality, and just as assuredly that there were mysteries left in the world that hissing science had been unable to account for, here was one of them.

His dreams of several hours previous had convinced him of one thing; the necessity now to proceed with caution. He carefully began to tap words out onto the screen, his fingers trembling.

Alex looked very intent tonight, she thought. She already knew he was decent at love-making. If Tom was a little leaner, a little more intense in appearance, what did it matter? Tom was a dreamer, not a *doer*. He was a sucking void in so many ways, not at all husband material. Oh, she still had a few flickers of feeling for him. But, hadn't Mom always said you had to pick the horse best suited to win the race, as far as men and dating went? Alex would be a tenured professor someday.

Tom would be--*what?*

She smiled, bitterly.

"I want to show you something, Crystal--something that is special to me."

"Ok," she said. She wanted to be nice to him, she realized. Here was a real catch. Here was a decent, conscientious, and hard-working man.

Tom began pounding words faster and faster, "...and as he

took her, deeper into remote country, while her attention was diverted with pleasant thoughts, while she only wanted to envision a future he knew was nothing more than a prism of illusions and lives.

“Fields of tall, proud American grain whipped past them in the Indiana night; he felt his chest grow cold, his heart grow small, infinitesimally small, like a cold dot upon his inner-chest. He was driving with a mounting erection, his eyes zoning out, his skull becoming a heated battery that flashed before his inner-eye such wonderful images: apprehension, seduction, conquest, regret, defilement, and , finally, retribution. He had done it before, had made himself a master of fate, a man a thousand feet tall, just by sitting back, and letting go, and letting this feeling take over.

Handcuffs. Screaming. Beating. Slow torture. Dispatched. Buried. Covering the evidence, erasing the tracks, slipping on the same mask again. It was becoming routine.

Beneath though, beneath the mask...”

Tom beat his hands nervously against the keys, trying, in some way to be able to convince himself that his ending, as opposed to that ending, or another set of circumstances altogether, was superior. Was, in fact, what any discriminating reader would suspect of a situation so comprised of some many shady variables of human motivation. The characters were pitted tightly against each other, humanity pitted against the inverse of human compassion; of reason, logic, light and love. He stood for a moment to catch his breath, went to the stereo, and pushed *Play* on the dial. Nick Cave broke into a mournful song, telling Tom that all the towers of ivory had fallen, and the sparrows had sharpened their beaks.

He turned, opened the door, looked out at the darkness of the staircase, knew that the darkness was pregnant with possibility. The staircase seemed ominous for some reason; full of the alien potential of a transit from one threshold to the other, he walked out onto the landing, rounded the corner, went into the

bathroom, and looked at himself in the mirror. He did not realize, for a second, who he was.

Merrick stood in the limitless expanse of the Silent Cathedral, listening to the plop-plop of water. In the baptismal fount, several crippled bodies had gathered to pray for a healing miracle. He was perplexed; he had no idea how he had managed to come here; perhaps, finally, he was dead.

“No.”

He turned, slowly, peering in the relative gloom of the candlelight. Beyond, somewhere, he could see a figure begin to coalesce from the swirling vapors of shadow.

“W-where am I? Who are you? Am I dead?”

The figure began to inch closer.

“No, my son.”

Pause.

“Then, where am I?”

“Here, my son.”

Pause.

“And...may I ask, where exactly is here?”

“With us, my son.”

“And where are us? Who is you?”

The figure halted its advance

“Someone who loves you, very much.”

And the figure came toward him, as radiant a vision as had ever been conjured in the fevered brain of man. A Madonna; yet beneath the loose-flowing robes that gathered at her ankles, beneath the scarf that adorned the head, beneath the perfectly-parted hair that crowned the oval frame of the face, that hugged the milk-white forehead and the lustrous, bejeweled eyes, was a face that Joseph knew from memory like he knew the stetorous sound of his own breathing. Like he knew the distorted aspects of his countenance, like he knew the gross collection of tumours that were his identity in the world of living men.

He knew her.

He began to weep, then; a righteous, powerful wracking sob of despair, or jealous, self-pitying, unyielding grief that knew no bounds or limitations. It was all here now, all laid out before him in this dim cathedral, this house of worship somewhere beyond the reach of the cold, unyielding grasp of the world.

Here in the House of God, there was pity, and mercy, and love.

"I--I have waited so long..."

There was no explaining it now; any of it. The entire nightmare which had begun, like so many others, interspersing the various adornments of his reality with the tangled web of his illusions, had now come to its conclusion.

"Come--it is heaven in here...and we have all of eternity. Come with us, my son."

Beyond the pale surface of this illusion that he called his life, there was now a certain knowledge that it was merely, just that: an illusion. She reached forward, touched the hem of his cloak with her fingers, and his mind exploded in a shifting prism of yesterdays, in a collection of remembrances and incarnations, each more vast, and stirring, and absurd, and pointless than the last.

"In one life a prince, in another a pauper. In one life a killer, in another a victim. Come with us, my son."

Suddenly, it was all perfect; it was complete. It was an eternal moment, standing there, weeping, madly, remembering who he was, had been would be. There was no time then, only the moving onward and upward that never ceased. He grasped at the hem of her cloak, and whimpered. He was terrified.

The massive doorway of the cathedral opened, slowly, and shafts of brilliant light began to pour forth, covering them, covering him, in a moment that, for as long as he could remember, he had been waiting for; praying for. He fell to his knees.

"Come with us, my son...It is heaven, in here. And we have

all of eternity.”

“I have waited so long. Now I understand. God help me, now I understand. All the suffering of the world. And all the vile faces, and every dirty thing that I have ever thought or dreamed, and everything else. Now I understand.”

And there they stayed, for a century. For a lifetime. For a thousand lifetimes. One prism of existence, one fillip of reality, one grain of sand on the beach of a million different oceans. But a moment of time had its own perfection.

Beside him she stood, in eternal watchful vigilance. They became a vivid portrait, a fresco of the absurd. Mother and Son, in eternal repose.

“Come my son. Your burden has been lifted. It is heaven, in here. And we have all of eternity.”

He rested his head, his great gross head that had plagued him for time beyond madness, into that cool bosom, and never raised it again.

“It is heaven in here...”

Joseph felt his breath catch. His breath...ah. It was dark. It was night. He had had a bad moment there. Almost thought he had started slipping backward. Had he cried out? No, he must not think like that. Of all things in the world, sleep must not become dangerous...

Sleep.

Tom picked his head up from the desk, in a moment of terror. He had fallen asleep at the keyboard. He sat back, looked at the screen, rubbed bleary eyes for a moment, and looked at what had just been written there. He thought it rubbish. He dragged himself from the chair, went to the window, looked out at the street. Dawn would be casting its rays across the world in a chilly birth that would signal the same cycle of life to begin again. But now, in the darkness, he was at the threshold time, when it was safe to sleep. To dream.

He considered sleep. No, that wasn't right. There was still something else. Didn't he have a novel to finish, a woman to destroy, a killer to capture, a monster of the supernatural to contend with?

He looked at the screen dully.

There was no monster.

No killer.

No woman.

There was only history, and what he tried to do with it. How he tried to bend it through the prism of his own inner-eye. What had he been trying to do? What had he wanted to say? Did an idea have to be beaten into some sort of identifiable, easily-digestible shape? Did it have to be a horror, a fantasy, a romance? Did it have to be enticing? Was a story a prostitute?

He felt like he had finally drained the cup dry. There was no place left to run. He had envisioned a real man, and he had distorted his image in away that even he found unacceptable. Fiction was a killer, then.

Alex Mona.

Crystal.

Joseph Merrick, Freddy Treves, Hildy Watkins, Dick Neville, and the rest. He saw them all for a moment, the fictionals he had brought to life like some mad scientist, bent over his own personal monster. And what a monster it was, what a waft of ugliness had erupted from the bowels of his mind.

As he saw the sun peep from between the hanging branches of the tree outside his yard, he considered the illusion of time. There was no time, no distance here. In the night.

In dreams, he could walk with whom he wanted, love whom he wanted, kill whom he wanted, and be whatever in his heart it was he wanted.

He sat back down. He was going to finish this his way, and criticism of self be damned. Sentimentality be damned. There was no helping it. A soul went forth in the world, taking its burden with it, and that burden could weigh you down. It could kill the

joy in you heart, the laughter dying on your teeth. It could steal your love.

“She fought him madly, taking a fresh clump of hair in her fingers. His bulk was overwhelming, the curled and thrashed on a carpet of dry leaves in the desolation of an abandoned cemetery. He curled his fingers around her throat, feeling the animal roar inside of him, feeling the savage scream within his skull, knowing there was no turning back--”

Suddenly, he rose, stopping mid-sentence, and going to the stereo. He would have turned on Nick Cave but he had been listening to him all day, and now it was time for something with a sense of finality, with a sense of the utter desolation of our existences on this earth, the meaninglessness of a life that would, in the end, be snuffed out anyway.

He found his song. It was “Song to the Siren”, by *This Mortal Coil*. This was perfect. This was the music of release, of deep yearning, of the futility of our hopes and dreams in the midst of the random catastrophe of existence. He went tiredly to his keyboard, blinked, rubbed his eyes, and began again.

He erased what he had just written.

He began again.

Murder. The death of the beloved object of his affection. The pale horror of the tragedy. The moonlit night; the desolate, country road. The supernatural hold of the beast in man finally broken, the monster put back into the cage, the victim finding succor in the arms of the maternal angel, all of it spun before him like so many alternating pathways and currents in time. Yet none of it was real.

What is real?

“Love,” he answered himself.

Suddenly, he had it.

She rushed toward him, wrapping her arms around his neck. She still retained the same aspect of shock, the same “I’ve-just-survived-a-living-nightmare” expression on her face. But now,

she found safety, in his arms.

“I’m sorry I ever doubted you. I--”

“No,” he said. “Don’t say anything. Not now.”

They hugged for what seemed like an eternity. At first, it was in a hospital, where she had been rushed after being rescued, somehow. Then, it became, slowly, in the way that such things can and do happen, a police station. Then, it was the campus of Ball State University. And then, it simply was *that* place, that Elysium of the Spirit, where the sun was always setting, but night never came.

“I love you.”

“*I love you.*”

“Will you marry me?”

“I’ll marry you.”

He kissed her then, madly, desperately. In his mind arose a house for two lovers, full of children, full of joy, in a town perched on the edge of eternity. He saw all the days as one, moving before him at a dizzying speed. But now it was love. And love conquered even the bonds of time.

They turned to go. He took her hand, led her through the thick stand of trees, listening to the music of his heart. Suddenly, she asked, curiously, “Where are we?”

He turned. He smiled. He knew now, it was the end.

“The place where there is no darkness. “

And that was no fiction, at all.

Epilog

Then, with reason armed with resolution, let the seeker quietly lead the mind into the spirit, and let all his thought be silence.

---*The Bhagavad Gita*

When he finally died, it was with as much dignity as he had lived. He had sat down to slumber, his dreams, for the first time in a long while, composed of nothing but the most peaceful scenarios.

He had gone to bed late that night, making sure to finish the book he was currently reading. It was some beautiful poetry from the America's. He particularly liked a passage by a writer of the 'forties, a Mr. Edgar Poe:

"...Is all that we see, or seem, but a dream within a dream?"

He liked that. It gave him some solace knowing that he might sit down this morning, upon a pile of his cushions, and find out that the life that had tortured him for twenty-seven years, was nothing but a dream. Somewhere farther away even than America, was a place he could go to and know no pain.

He looked at the picture of Mary Jane. There she seemed to still be smiling at him from beyond the grave; no, from beyond the years. However, as he was quickly realizing, time was little more than an illusion.

He remembered being a child, and how turned against him Father had become. How it seemed as if, the more repulsive his condition became, the less his father wanted to do with him. Uncle Charles had been his only refuge then, when stepmother had decided he simply had to go.

He saw all their faces: kind, cruel, horrified, indifferent, and otherwise. He wondered for a moment why these faces haunted his life, and not another. He wondered deep down in the pit of his soul, and he tried to collect, like so many wispy strands of thread, his history, and the history of those faces.

What had happened to them? How many had passed on, without him even knowing of it? He did not even know what Tommy Norman was doing these days. Moreover, he had, he was ashamed to admit it, liked Tommy.

"The 'Silver King'! Really..." Joseph laughed to himself. "Well, Tommy, wherever you are these days, you were certainly aptly named..."

And there had been Lucio, the Italian Wolfboy, who brought him candy at night, on the road, through Holland, and Denmark, and had kept him company through some of his most miserable times. And there had been the wonderful doctor who

aided his return to England, when he had been robbed and cast aside.

Moreover, of course, there had been Freddy, first and foremost and always--doctor, mentor, and friend. Joseph seemed to, faintly, remember some rather nasty business that had seemed to transpire between them, back in '88...his memory was getting worse, of course. It seemed like he read so many novels, at times, that it became quite difficult to separate real events from things that he simply read about. In addition, of course, it was nonsense. How in the world could there ever be bad blood between him and Freddy?

Uncle Charlie, Freddy Treves, and Rev. Valentine...the royalty of his life, what he aspired to in his most elevated ideas of what he could himself mimic and achieve as "Gentleman Merrick". There--they had created him. He was no longer the Elephant Man. Now he was their *Joseph*. His transformation had been complete. There was no higher state to attain.

He had been through the fire, and he had come out a man.

No one on the nursing staff knew it, but Merrick, long ago, had managed to obtain a circle of polished glass that he kept secreted. It was a sort of private ritual he held, to take out the tiny piece and look at his own hated face in it. He did that now, barely catching a substantial glimpse, but seeing enough to know that his time was nearly up.

His skin had become more and more old and debased; he had literally become decrepit and withered in the space of three short years. He looked like an ancient, already.

His heart was weak, his breathing was punctuated by spasms of coughing and, damnit, attacks of bronchitis. His bodily condition was so burdensome, that it required more attention than he could muster these days to pull himself out of bed before noon. To top it all, the damn distortion of his mouth that had been carefully excised at Liecester Infirmary was now beginning to grow back. It was getting so that even Freddy could not understand him anymore.

He sat down with heavy thoughts that last day, wanting his mother, wanting Freddy, wanting someone--if only to speak with in the stillness of the night. Most of all, he finally wanted peace for himself.

"I wish," he said out loud, "I wish that there was a place in heaven for everyone that I want to be with me. Everyone that I love. Will I ever see them again? Maybe some of them. Maybe none of them. Could I stand heaven if mother was not there? Or if Freddy wasn't there?"

He felt tired. He always felt tired now, and Nurse Ireland usually did not even bother to take him to bath until later in the afternoon. Well, damn it, what did they expect? He was an old man.

He thought of the last time he had talked to Freddy. There had been something in the air, some sort of strange unspoken thing that neither one of them had broached.

He had come in a hustle, with a full roster in front of him for the day, but had ended up staying a half hour, and then coming back later in the evening to finish their conversation. However, the single most dispiriting knowledge that Treves had had on his heart was that Merrick, physically, had nearly reached the end of his rope.

It had been almost a good bye, that night.

"Well, Joseph...as you might already know, I'm going to be rather busy these next few weeks. I'm not sure how much time I will be able to spend with you."

"I understand, Doctor. It is so good to see you, always. I eagerly await our conversations."

Treves looked downcast. He could feel a sense of something riding in the air, and he knew it was the sort of something he would have learn just to accept in the same coldly clinical way he had had to accept the death of some of his patients. He had long combated death, but as any good physician knows, the fight can only be sustained so long.

"Yes, as do I."

Pause.

"Joseph?"

"Yes, Freddy?"

"Do you remember what I told you once, about God? About how I thought that God was a human construct--not real, in the sense that we think of as real."

"Yes. I know all about your feelings on God." Joseph sounded somewhat disappointed, as he always did whenever he and Freddy broached the subject of Freddy's atheism.

"Well, Joseph, I have been doing some thinking. And I sometimes wonder, perhaps, if maybe I have been very wrong--very wrong, indeed."

Joseph seemed genuinely surprised.

"Really Freddy? And what makes you think that you might have been wrong?"

Treves had to stop a moment and pick out what Merrick had just said. His facial deformity had progressed to the extent of rendering his speech a nightmare to comprehend. However, he got the gist, and said, "Well, perhaps I was looking at it from a very selfish fashion. Perhaps I wondered why God allowed so much suffering to exist in the world."

"And what do you think now? Do you think that God is good, Freddy? Do you think that God is love?"

Nevertheless, Treves really could not answer him. Silence reigned for an interminable moment.

"I think," He said slowly, "that God sends those he wants to go forward in the world, to teach certain men a lesson. I think some men need to learn how to be humble, and some men need to learn how to be kind...some men need to learn honesty, and some men need to learn the value of hard work."

"I..." he trailed away, and then finally said, sadly, "I needed to learn about suffering. I had never understood what it was really like. I saw enough of it in the surgery, but I never *knew*...until I met you, Joseph. I want you to know, that no matter what

happens I will never forget you. I will never forget you. You have changed my life, as much as I have changed yours, and for that, I am eternally in your debt, sir."

Joseph became very quiet, and if he had not been swallowed by grief by the age of seven, he might have managed tears. As it was, he said, "You have made the last four years the happiest of my life, Treves. Please, as long as a heart beats within me, know that I will always be grateful to you. You have saved me. You have brought me back peace, and my thoughts are my own again. I know what it is like to live, because of you."

They realized that the hour was drawing late, and they took a few more minutes to talk about trivialities. They laughed at their own silliness. They ate up the minutes with memories of discovering who each other were. Then Freddy remembered he had a family who was waiting for him in a nice house, around a dinner table. He rose, exhaled, and then said with a briskness that was mostly feigned.

"Goodbye Joseph, I will probably be back around sometime tomorrow evening."

However, as Treves left, turning to wave a sort of half goodbye, he knew that this was, quite possibly, the last time he would ever again sit in Bedstead Square, with Joseph Merrick.

He walked down one of the long, lonely hospital corridors, taking as much time as he needed to get out the front entrance. As he finally exited, taking in the night air with great gasping breaths, he realized that he was weeping. He felt like the weight of the entire world had conspired to crush the joy from him, and he wondered, again, if he really understood, fully, what suffering was really like.

As for Joseph, the time had finally come for Treves to let go. To let his patient pass on.

That had been two weeks ago, and Merrick had seen little of Treves since then. Every time he popped his head in the door, it had only been for fleeting moments, and only to say a quick

word or two. He knew that Treves was distancing himself; and he knew that, as far as the world was concerned, he was ready to find peace, finally.

Merrick sat down in bed and considered what he might have in store for him. Heaven? Perhaps, but maybe heaven, with angels wings and trumpets and harps was not quite right. For him heaven was the beautiful faces of Mary Jane, and Frederick Treves. His biological mother and his spiritual father. Whatever it was let it be. Goodbye and God bless.

I will miss you, old world, as much pain as you have given me. I will miss hot dinners, and I will miss good books. I will miss the sunset, and the beauty of the hospital gardens, and making cardboard castles. And I will miss talking, and laughter. And I will miss love, too.

Finally, he had just lain down on his horrible back, realizing that there was no more point to taking the charade any further. God would not hold him responsible; this was not suicide. This was simply rest--forever and ever, amen.

It had been earlier that morning that Nurse Ireland had come in to tidy up and see if he needed anything. Speaking to him, but being rather busy, she had left him crouched on the bed, and departed. Next, a ward maid came with his lunch, at 1:30, but it was not until Hodges, the House Surgeon, had come to make some routine physical examinations, that he found Joseph lying prone, dead, apparently of asphyxiation.

Treves had been informed immediately, and proceeded to stuff whatever grief he felt under the now necessary acts of autopsy, and careful preservation of skin samples. Plaster casts were made of Joseph's feet and arms, and head. Finally, Merrick was de-boned, and his skeleton pieced together and stood up as a specimen for scientific examination.

Before that though there had been a memorial service held in the hospital chapel, and those members of the staff, as well as F.C. Carr Gomm, had attended. Treves had been busily consoling several nurses, and particularly Nurse Ireland, who seemed to

have been blaming herself, slightly, as being lax in her care.

"Sir, I was with him, right before he passed on this afternoon. I feel so terrible. Like, perhaps I should have stayed with him, and maybe I could have done something."

Treves put his arm around the woman, and pulled her close to him.

"No," he told her. "You really mustn't think like that. He would not want you to. His life was a misery to him. Now he is free."

Tristram Valentine commenced with reading a few short passages from the Bible. Treves recognized them as the *Beatitudes*. Blessed are the poor in spirit, and all that.

Well, tomorrow he would begin dissection. Then he would be Treves the scientist, Treves the *rationalist*. Tonight he was simply Frederick Treves, a man that had lost a very dear friend.

He did not weep. He didn't think Joseph would want that either.

Well, Joseph, I suppose I was wrong yet again. You have escaped your cage. I hope the next life is kinder to you, old man. I want you to know that I did not lie. To the end of my life, I will never forget you.

He wondered where he was at now, what new lands he was journeying through. He wondered if he was, truly, finally, at *peace*. He smiled, in spite of himself.

Because, thinking of that hideous visage lying back in bed, for the first time in life, and resting the massive gross head on soft pillows, made Frederick Treves certain of at least one thing concerning the death of his friend:

Wherever in the mind of God it was he now rested, Joseph Merrick was dreaming..

Afterword

Whatever this novel may be there is one thing that it is certainly not: This is not an attempt to recreate, factually, the life of Joseph Merrick, or the crimes of Jack the Ripper. It is not meant, in any way, to be taken as historical truth.

This is simply a *story*, one that has been developing in my head and heart since I was very young.

I well remember the first time in my life when I had ever heard the name the Elephant Man. It was a bright day in 1980, and my mother had taken me for a walk through the neighborhood, and down to a local park.

I played quite contentedly with the other children, until the sun began to set abit, and then she grasped me by the hand and led me home. Those days seem as poignant as looking at faded photographs. I can still remember mom cooking hamburgers in the kitchen while dad was at work.

She had sat down with me on the couch, as soon as we got in, and picked up the T.V. Guide. On the cover was a picture of a rather handsome young man, with a sort of wicker cane. I asked my mother who it was.

"Oh," she said. "That's the Elephant Man."

"Who's he?"

She didn't know how to explain it, based upon the picture, but said anyway:

"He was very ugly, from what I know. He lived a long time ago, and people were mean to him."

I looked at the picture. I couldn't understand it. The person on the T.V. Guide was not an ugly man at all. I was deeply confused, and then fear began to set in.

The man on the cover seemed menacing, somehow. He was not ugly, but everyone had shunned him...Apparently, he was just *bad* in some way that I could not understand. I know this sounds like a bizarre jump in logic, but give me a break, I could not have been more than four years old.

He became my childhood "boogey-man". I was terrified. It only took the words "elephant man" to make my little heart race. When the play finally came on television a little while later, I threw the fit of my life when my parents tried to watch it. I kicked and screamed, and I remember them angrily sending me to bed.

I could not help it; it was something, perhaps, about the strange "outdoor garb", that Merrick had been forced to wear in real life as well as fictional. I think, deep inside, that the real horror was the fact that, with that hood over his face, you couldn't *see* how horrible his face *really was*. It might be mind-bogglingly nightmarish; you could go insane, like a character from a Lovecraft story.

By the time I began to grow and mature, I knew I was going to have to finally conquer what had turned into a full-blown phobia. I made my mother rent a videocassette of David Lynch's movie *The Elephant Man* (1980) when I was thirteen, and I steeled myself up to watch it. I was deeply moved by John Hurt's incredible performance, as well as the poignant, and haunting atmosphere generated by the cinematography, and, of course the avant-garde imagery that the director was famous for.

What had not impressed me was the supposed horror of Merrick's appearance. Far from finding him repellent, the deformities did not, really, seem to be quite the mind-numbing shock that I had thought they would be. Once you begin to appreciate the child-like nature of Merrick, they become so secondary that, had they not been an integral part of the story, you would have completely have forgotten about them.

It took me a few more years, but soon I had managed to turn what was formerly a strong aversion into a new kind of bizarre fixation. I began to read everything I could about Merrick, and to hunt down all the photographs. I developed a website, made a speech about him in one of my college classes, and now I have written this novel, as my final lasting tribute.

As for Jack the Ripper, Merrick and he go hand in hand, in some strange way, as an historical diptych. Both existed at exactly the same time in exactly the same place, and both were contemporarily newsworthy, though for vastly different reasons.

In closing, I would like to state, now and forever, that this novel in no way suggests that Sir Frederick Treves is actually a likely suspect to have been Jack the Ripper. This is NOT a piece

of "Ripperology", and I am certainly not suggesting that the plotline of my novel is the literal objective truth. Frederick Treves was a wonderful human being who spent his life in the aid of his fellow man, and essentially rescued Joseph Merrick from dying in a workhouse, or on the streets. All situations within the pages of this book are purely inventions of the author's imagination, and where they are based on historical fact, they are used fictitiously. Again, this is NOT a factual book on Jack the Ripper.

To this day, Joseph Merrick is one of only three famous historical personages that can actually inspire me to write about them as fictional characters. The others are Charles Fort (the great chronicler of unexplained phenomena) and Rhode Island's visionary master of horror and "weird" fiction, H.P. Lovecraft (whose biography, by L. Sprague De Camp, I have read twice for sheer pleasure).

However, Merrick still has a coveted place all his own. The others only inspire me to write.

Merrick can inspire me to weep.

The Shooting

This book is a silent concert.

Prolog

Tanner Benjamin rolled around in bed and stared at the ceiling. Outside, a lightening storm seemed to have been imported from some classic *Universal* monster film. All that was missing was the manic presence of a Colin Clive, or the sepulchral, withered features of Ernest Thesiger. It was perfect nightmare weather, and that was what Tanner had been having.

His dream, however, had been more than a dream; it had been a revelation.

Unfortunately, he had no idea how to put it all together, or

what it really meant. But it was so damned eerie, he found sleep at this point to be impossible.

It was as if he was connected to some vast, computerized intelligence. He could see the world (or at least his small portion of it) like it was a form of diagram, or schematic. He realized, then, in the small hours of the morning, that all of life is interconnected in a strange way that is nearly, without the aid at least of some system of consciousness-expansion, impossible for the typical workaday mind to conceive.

He closed his eyes. He was gone again, unexpectedly.

At precisely that moment, and that moment was either damned late or damned early depending on your perspective, two young men who had sold their souls away for bitter herbs and sickened bellies looked at their collection of pornographic DVD movies. They found it to be completely dissatisfying, and one of them remarked, "I wonder what it would be like to rape someone?"

The other man, a tall, lanky man who was popular with young women, looked at him and said, "why don't you try it and find out?"

The two young men laughed, although the remark had not been funny.

Across town, Kevin Hickman was sitting in a bar by himself, wondering what had happened to his life.

He hefted the glass to his lips. He swilled down the dark, foul-tasting beer. It no longer held any sensation for him to drink. He had become numb, inside and out. It was honest addiction that kept him going.

"Hey man, you wanna come up to my place and smoke a joint?"

The man sitting next to him was very drunk. He was a

mental patient of Hickman's acquaintance. A guy they called "Electric Jake" because of his brief, supposed, history of electro-convulsive therapy. The bar was nearly silent. Only a few tired souls dotted the respective benches of the great long wooden tables.

"Sure. Hell yeah. Let's do it."

Kevin finished his beer with one gulp, slid off the stool, and followed the smaller, swaying man outside.

Outside, the decrepit storefronts that had seen so many businesses come and go over the years looked black and inviolate. It looked like they were keeping the secrets of the city at bay.

Hickman followed the little man around the dark corner, down a block, past a waiting police officer, and then both men disappeared into a hole in the wall that led up a precarious, foul-smelling flight of stairs into a cubby with a bed and a toilet. Home.

Several blocks away and closer to the bridge, in a little house that had seen far-better days, Jill Lavender sat cross-legged on her couch, smoking a cigarette in the darkness of the night.

Bruce had not bothered to come home. Bruce was staying out with his buddies more and more these days. He always told her she wasn't his "mother". But damnit, she was his lover, and it bothered her. And something else bothered her, too.

Something she had heard from a friend of hers.

Little Lindsey was upstairs, no doubt snuggled away in the bosom of sleep. She loved the kid. She also felt damn guilty, too. Lindsey deserved a decent man to be her father. Unfortunately, Jill Lavender had had a habit of picking out shit heels to be her lovers, boyfriends, husbands. The habit had started in high school, with Lindsey's biological father.

She looked at the ridiculous TV programming. It was all infomercials at this hour. A very tanned, very aerobic-looking senior man was busy juicing different varieties of fruits and

vegetable matter. She flipped the channel. Now, a highly-spastic individual wearing a purple Joker suit covered in question marks was telling her about the wonders of government grants. She wanted to bawl.

She puffed at her long, skinny cigarette. The smoke curled into little clouds of noxious vapor in the cathode ray glare of the television. Maybe she should put in a video. *Steel Magnolias*, or something.

“Damn him,” she said to herself bitterly. “I’m still fairly young. I’m still good looking. Why does he want anybody else?”

Tanner Benjamin rolled and kicked furiously in his sleep. He could see it again, plainly. It was all interconnected. It was all a vast connection of different invisible life streams and time loops. His brain told him he was standing in the kitchen at Delcinos.

“You better hurry your ass up man. It’s getting backed-up out there.”

Tanner moved at speeds human beings could barely comprehend. He filled endless racks with dirty dishes, slamming the mouth of the washer closed. The audible whoosh of the sprayer sounded like a hurricane drone in the theatre of his sleeping mind.

He was alone in the kitchen. Where was everyone?

He could see the waitress come in. He couldn’t see her face. She didn’t seem to have a face.

She walked away on incredibly grotesque, backward-facing legs. It looked as if she had traded legs with an obscure, featherless breed of giant bird. He wanted to vomit. He could feel slime in his soul.

Suddenly, he heard the barking report of what sounded like a cannon. He rushed from the dish room, flinging open the door, and ran out into the maelstrom of the darkened bar.

All that he could remember after that was blood. Terror. Screaming.

And a body, floating like some elegant flower cast off into the ocean. How it crumpled. It was a female body, so beautiful it made him want to weep.

He bolted upright in bed, sweat beading his form. Outside, a crack of thunder and a flash of lightening illuminated the dull little room he called home. He got up from bed slowly, quietly, and slipped on his jeans.

The two young men who had sold their spirits stood outside in the sprawling backyard owned by the oldest man's father. They watched the lightening play it's magic upon the sky, and the trees swish, and dance, and shake in the wind. They could feel their own hideousness in the midst of this grand display.

"Kyle?"

"What?"

"We are going to hell, aren't we?"

He considered. The lightening threw a jagged spear across the heavens.

"Yes."

"Do you care? I mean, that we're damned?"

Pause.

"No."

"Good. Because if you don't care, well, then, that makes it easier for me. Because I know we have to do this now, man. I can feel it out here tonight. Can you? I can feel the *presence*."

It seemed, for a moment, like the two men could see an infernal, black shape move in the trees and bushes. They fancied it might be the Devil himself. At that same moment, Lindsey Lavender put her little face on her arm and began weeping in her sleep.

Secluded in a tiny foul-smelling cubby that hadn't been cleaned within recent memory, Kevin Hickman and "electric" Jake

passed a very thick, very powerful joint between each other. Hickman had been drinking all night. He looked as if he smelled as bad as he felt.

The lightening and wind conspired to cast the old building they sat in to it's heels. Kevin looked over his shoulder, out the ancient window pane, and said, his voice the sound of dragging tires, "I hope your apartment makes it through the storm, man."

Electric Jake had slumped into a ratty armchair that looked as if it had been pulled from the dumpster of the local Salvation Army, and could barely keep his eyes open.

He mumbled something barely intelligible.

"No. Didn't you hear me? I said, the storm might tear this apartment down. Man, I think I better be heading."

Kevin Hickman made sure to bogue the roach. Old Jake was too far gone already to even notice. Hell with him.

Kevin managed to find himself back out on the street. He walked warily down the sidewalk. His place was an ancient house of monumental ugliness and disrepair. But it was, at least, a roof.

Darkness. Darkness. All around him darkness and loneliness. Walking back to your room before the dawn, when the world slept through it's nightmares, and being alone, was one of the hardest things he had had to get use to.

It looked surreal. The faded bricks. The old storefront windows. Many men had walked here before for over a century back.

Did any of their ghosts still beat these pavement with tired shoes? He crossed over by the flower boutique, past an old bank building, heading into his own neighborhood. He was able to pick out the frame of the vast edifice through his bleary, dope-addled eyes. He managed his way into the side door.

He didn't notice, but one of the cars that passed him as he walked carried a very beautiful female form. He would meet this same woman in two nights, and though he would never in his life actually get to know her, his meeting with her would be an integral part of the story that was told later, and sold on checkout lines in

cheap rags across the USA. Even the name of Kevin Hickman would have a sort of fifteen minute brush with celebrity.

But he didn't know that then, as he walked into the darkened kitchen, past the pool table, into the large foyer that had once belonged to a single family.

He walked up the stairs, slowly. There was a doorway on the second landing that led to a side section that was all small rooms that could have accommodated college classes. The building had been added on to, changed around, demolished, and brought back up again in such a haphazard fashion that the architectural layout was nearly occult.

On the uppermost floor there was an abandoned, vintage diner that dated from right after WW2. Even Kevin Hickman sometimes got the shivers in this house. Age is not our friend, he reflected.

Professor Milt Seebaum shoveled in a cold turkey TV dinner.

He always bought around ten of them every pay day. He went through them damn quick. Ah, the bitter hours of morning restlessness. Lucky he didn't have classes to teach today. Lucky for him, because he was damn irascible on no sleep.

He wanted another one, thought better of it, and set the plastic tray on his nightstand. Who cared if he was a slob? Not like he ever had many visitors. Goodnight, Mr. Chips.

The lightening and thunder were grand, really, He could see out the filmy curtain how intense, how alive nature was. And it always struck him as somewhat sad that his own nature was so restricted. So formal. So repressed.

Then he closed his eyes. He remembered who he was. He was Dr. Milton H. Seebaum. He was a cultured man, a man who had spent his entire life in pursuit of learning. And teaching.

Romance, he surmised, was not for everyone.

He drifted into sleep. His dreams were all permutations of

the same theme. He was holding back an army of drooling, pathetic ogres with a single torch of illumination. That torch was all that meant anything to him. But he was lost in a wilderness, alone. And the wind was blowing, and the fire was beginning to dim.

Tanner stood in front of the rooming house with a cigarette clasped in his shaking fingers. He was half-terrified of the storm, but found it exhilarating in equal measure. His half-awake mind was still focusing on the images of his strange dream.

The darkened panic.

Gunshots.

The falling woman.

(Later, Tanner would go back upstairs and sleep. His dreams would become even more troubled, dreams chiefly concerned with decay, with deformity, with themes of distress and repressed anger.)

Around him, the world slept, awoke, shuddered, breathed, sobered, suffered and waited. And this was only one morning, just before dawn.

Part One

One

It was the pounding down force of the music that seemed to rock them all to a sort of religious ecstasy. Wasn't it, after all, the tribal drumbeats of certain native African witch doctors that were supposed to call forth the spirits from beyond? He wasn't sure; he could hardly see now why it even mattered.

There were an assortment of skinny young girls here; all clad in the same regulation black, scuffed jeans, worn gray at the seams by the endless moving of the material up shapely, skinny young hips. It was a real gasser to look at.

Tanner was so drunk he could barely stand up. He kept walking around the room, minutes passing by in the firmament of time, making the late evening into the early morning. He passed some drunken man who was busily rubbing the crotch of a hopeful amour. In the kitchen, the guitar player was having a heartfelt conversation about beating up some of his classmates at a young age. Tanner sincerely hoped he didn't, tonight, decide to demonstrate his technique upon the weaker ones assembled.

The air was heavy with the smoke of cannabis, marijuana, dank...call it what you will. He took a regulation puff. He needed to make these people feel calm.

It was a communal thing amongst grass smokers to pass a little...but don't bogue the joint, and for gods sake don't fink on anybody's weed. It was beyond the pale of what could be considered proper etiquette to do such a thing.

Tanner was what a generous person might call "socially inept". It is never a good idea for the socially inept to be intoxicated in a room full of testy egos all vying for the attention of young ladies of loose virtue. It is never a good idea...but Tanner rarely had good ideas.

More often than not, he had trouble. When he had tagged along to this affair, he was, it assumed, still sober enough to maintain his social composure in front of the assembled. He had *assumed* that, at least. Unfortunately, it was failing to be true.

Already, he had bumped the swelling breast of the bustiest maiden at the party. It had been completely unintentional, but I was the fact that, while it was happening, he had been too astounded to even move. Hell, he was sure he didn't even *vibrate* for a moment.

The tit in question had been kept snugly in a rayon boustiere affair that must have dated from at least 1970, but his bare hand (or the back of it at least) had swept down the curving slope of that unseen breast, to the pugnacious erection of the nipple in question. The breast that that nipple was attached to belonged to a body that was little, well-proportioned, and gabbing

drunkenly with a great, imbecilic oaf of a man that must have been the boyfriend. Tanner, before he even knew it, was being verbally assaulted by a series of harsh, barking voices calling him a plethora of nasty, suggestive names.

“You fucking asshole, why dontcha---”

Her gapey little face suddenly shot into a million particulates of infinitesimal disgust. Her bonehead boyfriend leaned over, and slurred, “Hey dickface, do you want to meet me outside?”

Tanner turned drunkenly, and suddenly a group of several anonymous strangers seemed to stumble between them, cutting Tanner off from almost certain death. But it would not last.

A young guy in a tie came ambling into the room. He had blood all over the front of his shirt. Suddenly, Tanner Benjamin felt an icy jab in his ribs. A great explosion of pain sent sparkles flying across his field of vision. He had been sucker-punched, and had been too drunk to see it coming. He fell backward into a loping retreat, past drunken sweaty faces, past bony female faces advertizing displeasure at the young body hurling itself through space and across the living room floor to the battered screen door that promised a mode of escape from Big Authoritative Jock Boyfriend.

Outside, some wilted teenage co-ed was busy throwing up dorm food onto the otherwise nice white driveway. Fresh air hit him like a soothing balm, and he took one deep, shuddering breath to still himself. You could probably hear the music inside several blocks away.

He walked, or rather, stumbled off the porch, past the assembled friends of the puking girl, and ambled out into the darkness of the yard. Suddenly, behind him loomed the Darth Vader visage of his assailant; a massive, quarterback-style silhouette that was making it's confused way outside to finish the job it had begun. Tanner realized he would have to hustle away from this ogre quickly, lest the scent of blood arouse the rest of the pack.

He began to try and disappear down the sidewalk, weaving in and out between people coming from, and going to, the party. The ogre simply stood on the porch, following him in the darkness with drunken eyes, and holding out one meaty fist, saying:

“Yeah, that’s right little boy, you better run. Know you’ll get your ass kicked. Messing with my girl...”

He shouted in short, declarative bursts of bully lingo, but at least, Tanner sighed, he was going to let Tanner go. Then, the icing on the cake. The one event of the evening that, somehow, made everything, seem a little bit better.

The fast approach of the lighted squad car. The party was over, for all of those who hadn’t been sucker-punched, at least.

Tanner awoke the next day with his head feeling as big as a basketball, and a growing, steady depression related to the fact that, in just a few hours, he would have to go to work.

It was never good going to work with a hangover. No matter how hard you tried, no matter how much Tylenol you took, no matter how concentrated nice you tried to be, for some reason, everybody still *knew*. They could smell it linger on you, like a dog pissing on a tree. Alcohol marked it’s territory. It was eerie.

Worse yet, the world around him and outside his window seemed as gray, as joyless as the onset of old age. He moved tired bones. He promised he would never do it again.

He lied.

He knew damn well he would.

He ambled out of bed and went to the wash basin. In the basin, he looked at his haggard face in the cracked bathroom mirror. Hooray for living.

Hooray for fucking life. As he saw it, it had fucked him in the ass before he even knew it had its blood up. He had been born to be the Quasimodo of the social set: a pariah, a dork, a nerd, a “young insignificant or inexperienced person”.

In other words: a four-eyed punk. A runty troll. A guy that

would never make the chess team, let alone the football team.

He applied a huge swell of lather to his chops, and commenced shaving. It was going to make it more endurable, he decided, to be cleaned up. To be free of the sweat and funk of first the bar and then the horrible party he had wandered into.

He smiled.

The party had gotten busted just as he was forced to leave. He could still see Darth Vader standing on the porch, his over-developed arm extended in a threatening finger-pointing gesture that must have really turned his girlfriend on.

“ Cocksucker...fucking jock. Jocks think they own everything, just because they have muscles on their muscles. Fucking cock.”

Tanner was so enraged for a moment he wanted to crush his own image in the mirror. Then he decided that this was probably bad luck. More bad luck he didn't need.

He started to scritch scratch the blade across his face. It felt good to be getting the stuff off his ample cheeks; nobody liked a pudgy dwarf, but they didn't like them even more if they had beard scruff. So.

He didn't cut himself. The way his head was swimming it felt like he was destined to cut himself.

Scritch scratch. Scritch scratch. Scritch scratch.

Whoosh.

He rinsed the blade off, looked at the tiny molecules of growth floating in the dank water. He looked in the mirror at his eyes.

Mhm. Totally bloodshot. Totally alien. Those eyes held a lot of impotent rage this morning. Those eyes had not been loved since those eyes could remember. Those eyes looked out upon the world that most people thought of as beautiful, and J. Tanner Benjamin thought looked like a pile of fresh dogshit.

He walked out of the bathroom, and looked at the phone. How much did he have in savings? Couple hundred? Enough to pay another month's rent? He had always been a conscientious

saver.

Call-off. Call-off. Better yet, just call those bastards up and say, “fuck you I’m outta here!”

Boy that would be rich. Boy, that would be a lot of fun.

Did he have the nerve?

He approached the phone slowly. His rumpled, cool covers looked as inviting, as enticing as anything he had ever seen before in his life. He wanted to desperately crawl in between them, pull them up over his head, and forget about the maddening pace and confusion of the world. If he went into work it was going to be busting his ass until one o’clock in the morning, washing dishes for a bunch of jock animals that he hated anyway...a bunch of drunk frat guys and their slutty, cyber-babe girlfriends. It was damn loud in that sports bar, what with Karaoke and shouted conversations, and even back in the kitchen it was so loud, sometimes, you felt like you had just stuck your head inside a wind tunnel and hit a button labeled “hurricane”. Could he take it? Could he deal with it feeling like he did?

Call off. Call off. Call off.

It was a quarter to two. If he dialed them with some lame-as excuse now, they would (a) can him when he did come in tomorrow, (b) demand he bring in proof of his illness, like a doctors slip, in which case he was back to (a). It was Saturday night, too; it would be busy as all-hell in there, and with no dishwasher, and no notice, really, and, and,...

He knew he was making up excuses to be a chicken shit. What would dad do, in this case?, he wondered. Plainly, dad would have done his American Best, as dad always did. Dad would have gone to work, toughed it out, been a man, did his best for God, and Country, and the I.R.S. Dad had been an athlete in school.

Dad didn’t much understand his quiet, bookish boy.

Tanner sat down naked on the bed, with only a robe wrapped around him. His fingers trembled as he reached for the long, snaking phone line. It felt evil coiled in his grasp. He pulled it toward him, finally, with a mounting sense of conviction.

It is imperative that I manage, somehow, to retain a sense of my sanity. If I go to work now, I will be filled to the brim with malignant rage. I will be noticeably, mentally unbinged. We can't allow that to happen. We won't allow that to happen. If needs be, I have sufficient savings to fall back on in case of dire emergencies, I can make it. I have never called off before. They will understand.

As he picked up the phone, his first words were, “ H-h-hello. This is Tanner. Tanner Benjamin. My father just passed away.”

Two

“Oh really,” the voice at then end of the long phone cord sounded plainly unconvinced.

“Yes. They just called me and told me. He had been ill for some time. Cancer.”

The voice stalled for a moment, rang up a customer, and said, “What exactly is it you do in the kitchen? This is Gary.”

It was okay, he thought. It was all going to be okay, because it was Gary. Gary was an enormous, hulking man that looked like he shit solid bricks of steroids. He was a bartender. He was a doorman. He was always, seemingly, smiling. You get that much pussy, Tanner thought, and the world always seems like it is bathed in rosy light.

“Um, what kind of cancer was it exactly?”

Tanner balked. This was serious off-guard territory. If he slipped up here, he was a dead man.

“Colo-rectal”.

He said it without thinking. He knew what it must have sounded like.

“Um, is this some kind of a joke Tanner? Because I don't find it very funny or amusing. We don't have anybody we can call-in to fill your place, and I'm like, I dunno, you call me and you tell me your father just died of ass cancer, and I'm like, *who in the fuck would lie about something like that?* Tanner?”

Silence.

Suddenly, "I-I was too afraid to tell you, Gary. I was too afraid of the humiliation. But now I can say it. I can say it. I can say, 'my father died of ass cancer and I love him'".

Tanner began to bawl, really bawl hard. He heard dead silence on the end of the line for a full minute.

"Hey...hey, we can't have you getting crazy on us. Our insurance won't cover it."

"I know, it's just so fucking hard."

"Hey, I know how you feel. I once had a puppy that got run over by a semi. This shit can be tough man. Look, I can't give you the whole night off, but maybe we can have somebody sub for you until we close...give you time to get your shit together."

Silence.

"Okay," snuffle, "okay man," Tanner wiped his soggy nose on his sleeve. It was dripping with fury. Half the night off? What the fuck did that mean?

"But, look, Tanner you've got to promise me that when eleven o'clock rolls around you'll be back in that dish room busting nuts. I mean, you're an important part of the team good buddy."

Yeah, thought Tanner, as long as I bend over and take one for the team, I'm an important part every time.

"Yeah, yeah Gary, sure thing."

Tanner switched over to what he always thought of as *an shucks little brother* mode; he put on a more child-like tone. He found it appeased the latent homosexual in all of these guys.

"Tanner, Tanner lemme hear it..." Gary's voice suddenly grew, oddly, cheery.

"Ah-oo-uh." Gary said this into the phone, slowly. Loudly.

"Ah-oo-uh, Gary" Tanner, said, knowing he was expected to reply in the like. It was a strange, seal-call sound that is still widely in use by the U.S. military as a sort of secret handshake. Gary had been ROTC in college. Tanner's dad was ex-military.

"Be here. Eleven. Got it?"

“Sure thing. Thanks Gary. I mean it.”

Tanner hung up the phone, wondering, not for the first time, what Gary might want to do to him if they were locked up in a cell together for an extended period of time.

Sure. A few more hours sleep, or time to dry a little, at least. It was what he needed. It was just now two, and he still had his job. He threw some clothes on, and wandered downstairs to smoke. But first he grabbed his work-shirt and satchel. Eleven o'clock, he sighed. He would play by the rules. He would be a good boy.

Little did he know then, he would never work inside of that stinking kitchen at Delcinos Sports Bar again.

Three

He went back upstairs and took a little nap. A few hours. He dreamed short, vicious, stabbing dreams that rocked him. But, upon awakening, he could remember what none of them were, really, about. He pulled on his clothes, tied on his floppy canvas shoes, and grabbed his satchel. He walked through the gloom downstairs.

The night was reasonably warm; the neighborhood was quiet as can be expected during the first few summer nights when life is just starting to creep back outside the front door after winter's icy claws have been retracted. He could smell backyard cooking, and hear some (probably) blond teenage girl giggle on some back porch in the arms of her (probably) boneheaded boyfriend.

This was a nicer neighborhood. This was a piss-poor town, only thing to recommend it was the college, but on a night like tonight one could forget that one lived, essentially, in the backwaters of human civilization, in a piss-poor town that didn't give a damn how happy you were. Or weren't.

His feet beat the pavement. If he could have taken a satellite photo of himself, he would have seen a slightly stooped,

twenty-seven year old male, very short, very bald, ragged in appearance, and with a pot belly. There was no getting around it: in a culture that seemed to take so much stock in beauty and wealth, he was a marked man.

“I will die a lonely, bitter fool,” he often thought. “I will never make a million dollars. I will never be anybody’s boss. I will never sleep with a decent woman.”

Pause.

“And I will never drive a *Lexus*. *Damn*.”

He tallied up some more of his inadequacies. It was mind be-numbing, really, this constant self-deprecation; he felt it was a necessary buffer against himself and the expectations of the world. After all, didn’t America care about it’s best and brightest?

Wasn’t that what he was? A man with an I.Q. over 150? A college graduate? A published writer?

Yes, yes, and yes. Still, it had not, for over a year, made much of an impact on anyone. Boo hoo.

The moon at least looked beautiful. A lovely crescent shaped sickle moon, adrift in the heavenly aether and oblivious to the little scurrying atomic humans that stared up at it on summer nights that promised the joys of good food, good sex, good times, to some.

He lived in a little rooming house down the street from the college. It was okay. At least he was within earshot of any loud noises. Loud noises were important to those that were, perpetually, frustrated with silence. And he had always been frustrated so.

“I am a loser. I am a looooooser. But,” he consoled himself, muttering under his breath, “at least I am smarter than Gary. Colon cancer? Oh, jeezus, he actually bought it, I think.”

Flip-flop. Flip-flop. Down the cracked sidewalk, closer to campus. Closer to scantily-clad young women. Closer to alcohol. He kept moving. Just one drink. He kept shaking. The night seemed pregnant with possibilities. He shuddered.

Closer. It seemed like time was just about flying by.

He stopped by the Student Union to see if anyone he knew might be there. It was a large building, fifty years old, and he had once been a janitor there. That had been okay. He got to use his psychic powers.

He had been sitting by himself up in the hotel area of the large, t-shaped old building, surrounded by bath towels, and old magazines, and little complimentary soaps that smelled like douche. He was hiding, avoiding his crew leader. He didn't have to work very hard at this. The crew leader was out back near the dumpsters, smoking a joint.

He felt the first few, faintest stirrings of consciousness play within him. He had only woken up around forty-five minutes ago, and had struggled in the dark, five-in-the-morning weather to get to the Student Union. It was funny how nothing had seemed real. As he walked down the lonely streets and sidewalks, he could feel the age of the world, free at last from the energies of eighteen thousand sweating bodies, pulsate around him in the dark. The moon had been high and scythe-like then, as well.

Now here he sat, in an old room off the main hallway, flipping through an outdated *National Geographic* and smoking a cigarette. He could feel tendrils of pleasure lick him. It made him want to shit.

Suddenly, in the fluorescent glow from the fluorescent tube in the ceiling, he could see his smoke whirl into a little galaxy off cancer. His eyes glazed over. His tummy rumbled. He slurped coffee. He felt good all over. Good and relaxed and pure.

Suddenly, out of the blue it hit him like a bolt.

Imagine an old man standing before you in immense brown corduroy pants. You have no idea how large the misshapen ass must be, but it must be very, very large and pendulous. The face has withered with age, and the jowls are a mass of flab. The pants, incidentally, are pulled up to the middle of the chest, old man style, and the shirt is some checkered piece that would have been better off in a Salvation Army bin. The breathing is a horrifying,

rasping, wheeze. The old man walks with a claw cane. He looks like a jolt of lightening brought him back from the wrong side of the crypt.

That man was standing in front of him, now. Materialized, for a moment, in the smoke. Tanner nearly wet his workpants. He rubbed his eyes. He was sure he must have dozed off.

The mouth worked; the throat rasped. Something was coming. This foul revenant was trying, in some way, to communicate.

“Chukka!”

Was the best it could do. It defied logic. It stood between himself and the door.

It vanished, slowly, still making the same rasping groan in it’s throat.

He flip-flopped through the glass doors and into the building. Best not to think about that right now.

There was a dining commons down the hall. Tanner could already hear the pounding lapping beat of rock music drone outside the double doors to the left. Coming out of those doors, incongruous with the office-like bearing of the Student Union, a group of trendy emo-rock fans walked across the hall and out the front doors. Tanner had come in the side.

Tanner had come *in* the side. Now, did he want to stay? Seven-thirty and all was well. A girl stood farther down the hall. She had a perfectly-squared jet black haircut and a plaid mini-skirt.

“Hey,” he said, sounding gruffer than what he meant to. “Who is playing tonight?”

He already knew the answer to this, but he wanted to appear as if he was actually interested. The girl looked at him as if he had just asked if he could piss down the side of her face.

“What you mean you don’t know? Get a life, dude.”

“Hey, all I want to know is who is playing tonight, is all. I like these bands, I party with them sometimes. You ever party with any of the guys in the band?”

She got all huffy.

“Well, if you must know, as a matter of fact, my boyfriend is in, like, the hottest band around. They just got signed to an indi label in Indy.”

“A -what?”

“An indi label from Indi-*anapolis*.”

“Oh, that’s really cool,” he said. He attempted to sound like he had a grain of enthusiasm.

Suddenly, the ice seemed to break a little. Now she was doing her job, promoting her boyfriend’s band.

“Yeah. They’re called *Saturn in Retrograde*. So. Yeah.” She kept staring at him, and drew her *yeah* out as if the word, in and of itself, held some sort of magic significance, as if it meant that she was agreeing with him agreeing with her that *Saturn in Retrograde* was really something to get all hot and bothered about.

He turned, mumbled, “can I piss down your face?”

“Do I wanna trade some tapes? No, I don’t have any tapes to trade myself, but if you wait till after their set I’m sure Chuck has some demos he can lend you. Or sell.”

He went past the double doors. A skinny, wiry, bespectacled youth with an anti-racism patch and 140 facial piercing asked him if he had six dollars to donate for “the cause”. He didn’t, but managed to get past the table with only giving four bucks and collecting several ragged pieces of literature on the wonders of vegetarianism and the necessity of harassing those that didn’t agree with your particular viewpoint. He walked ahead into the darkness.

Tables had been cleared away, stacked haphazardly, but it was to no avail. The turn-out was rather poor. On stage, several lanky young substance abusers belted forth a kind of listless, droning, clap-trap music with occasional screamed vocals. The bass itself was overpowering; the creative gestalt was not. Ringed around the large, relatively empty floor, bored high school students crammed into booths usually reserved for campus dining. There were a multitude of backpacks thrust onto tables. All of

them looked exactly alike: festooned with buttons and patches.

Non-conformity was astoundingly similar this season, he thought with a wry grin. *These kids never change.*

The young man singing looked like a tall, well-groomed, black-clad aardvark. His lyrics could not be discerned. His band looked as if they were practicing for part-time positions as living mannequins. The overpowering funk of their sweat was noticeable three feet from the podium.

A huge television set had been moved so they could set up their equipment. A skinny, anorexic-looking young girl with the same perfectly-bobbed hair swayed in time to the music. This was Saturday night.

He looked around. He wished it would have been some loud and fast nightmare, some *punk* band playing, and that a few more people had crowded in. Then he would have had an excuse to slam dance someone. As it was, he yawned, and walked out the opposite door.

He walked down the stairs and out back of the Student Union.

Did he dare look at his watch? It was dead of night dark, now.

He saw a very skinny, haggard-looking girl smoking a cigarette at the bottom of the steps. He walked down slowly, cautiously, stopping at the bottom of the steps and, casually, taking out a cigarette.

She was having a very heated conversation on her cell phone, finally plopping her ass on the cement curb at the bottom of the stairs, next to one of the ashtrays. She was looking at Tanner, but talking to a (probable) bonehead boyfriend.

“Yes...I know...I fucking, hey, that’s not fucking fair! Well, he sure thinks it is, so maybe I should just...no, I haven’t been fucking him. Well, why don’t you just go get some fucking skank pussy off of your crack whore sister, big boy? Do you hear me? *Just go fuck your own sister you fucking dickless asshole.* Cause we’re

through! Yeah, you just try it, cause if I ever see your sorry fucking face again I'll blow your goddamn head off! Motherfucker! Ahhh!"

She clicked her phone off with a yell. Tanner sat there looking at her, dumbfounded.

That had all been loud. Very loud. Very, very loud

"My name's Sabrina. Sorry about all that. When we get to yelling at each other, I just kind of lose it. Hey, can I ask you something?...*Uh, what's your name?*"

"Tanner...Tanner Benjamin," he said slowly.

"Hmm, Tanner Benjamin. Hey Tanner, tell me something: if I offered to give you a blow job right now, would you take me up on it?"

Four

She knelt down in his lap, pulling his cock free from his pants, and taking just the tip of it between her rosy red lips. He could see her high, jutting cheekbones suck in, work his cock, and he knew the deep liquid sensation of absolute, ecstatic pleasure.

He put his hand on the back of her head, guiding it down. But it didn't want to rest there, and leave so much potential territory unexplored. He put his explorers hand up her tee-shirt, which had ridden up as she knelt here to reveal her taut white belly. She had no bra on, just very small, plump pierced tits with deliciously engorged nipples. The oily sensuality of her hot bare flesh drove the spike of intensity further into his skull, and he unleashed a convulsive, brain-splitting orgasm.

And he couldn't very well scream out, you see, because they were still in the Student Union. Upstairs. In the reading room. It had been the closest place, and the only one he knew was easily accessible and relatively deserted. They were hidden in a little nook behind a bookcase full of moldering, cast-off volumes of

largely monumental dross. Library indexes. Self-help volumes. Victorian travelogues.

She leaned back, hoisted her shirt, and revealed her two delectable little breasts. He greedily tongued them. He thrust his hands down the back of her jeans, taking in twin handfulls of fleshy, doughy goodness.

It was extraordinary. No, it was more than extraordinary; it was miraculous.

He had never taken into account that he might one day get laid in the Student Union.

It was later, as they were driving down the lonely roads out into the country, that he began to suspect that something was, as they say, seriously amiss.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see”

It would be a miracle if she didn’t crash and kill them before they reached the destination that she seemed to be plummeting toward like a meteor. They had moved away from civilization, plummeting into the night like a swift, torpedo-like member might push into the aching crevice of a moist and fertile orifice. He was swept from his feet by this woman that he didn’t even know.

“Where are we going? Can you tell me where were going?”

He was not frightened. Not much, at any rate. He was actually somewhat exhilarated. The cool air blew through the crack in the window, whipping her short, frazzled hair around her face in a manner that was almost cherubic.

She stood on the rusted bridge, frail and terrible and full of fairy favors in the light of the milky moon. He approached her slowly, wondering why, in the space of but two hours he had been foisted into the bosom of a strange dream.

“What did you want to be when you were a boy, Tanner?”

She looked at him down the long, angular plane of her hollow cheekbone. It seemed like she were asking the deepest,

gravest philosophical question he had ever heard in his life.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm not a boy anymore, I suppose. But I still am. I can't help it. Life seems like it has never held much for me. Much good, at any rate."

"I think you underestimate yourself. Do you know what I wanted to be? A ballerina."

"Every little girl wants to be ballerina. You'll have to do better than that for deep, dark confessions."

She smiled, and then frowned, and he noticed again that her face seemed to have the odd quality of hiding whatever actual emotion was there behind it's complete opposite. Because, he did not feel, seriously, that she had meant to smile then, or frown. Or convey a sense of any feeling that could be accorded a natural, human feeling.

"I am different."

"How?"

"I'm not sure I can tell you. I'm not sure you'd believe me. You'll just have to trust me tonight. The night is still young."

They looked out over the churning blackness of the water that swept out of that foul state and must have found it's own true roots in some dark country where human feet seldom tread. Here, they were alone, for the first time. Above them, only a cold expanse of sweeping stars. And only country all around.

"I'm not a human being."

"I...could tell that, frankly."

"No. I mean---it has nothing to do with the other stuff we've done tonight. I mean, I'm not like you. I'm not solid like you."

He bent over to rub the skinny, pale arm. It felt like a cold stick that had been covered in skin.

"You feel real enough," he told her, and began to move closer to her again. Her smell seemed to have grown somewhat more bitter; more stale. He was a man whose deepest intuitive leaps were often governed by scent.

"I have never," he stated flatly, "had a woman offer, out of

the blue---what you gave me tonight.”

She looked at him again, and the expression of her face was one of vulpine hunger that nearly drove his blood to churn.

“It was about time, boy. And there are other things that we can do tonight. Secret things. Ending things.”

“Really. Like what?”

She turned and put her arms over the rusted metal railing. Below them, the water still brooded in tiny currents and eddies of time, swirling and swimming and catching secrets in it's liquid depths.

“I want you to help me a kill a man. Some men. Maybe a few men. Will you help me?”

Five

He considered. He wanted, badly at times, to wreak some sort of vengeance against God, humanity, what have you. It all amounted to the same swell of rage he felt when, upon awakening, he looked in the mirror to realize that he was still himself. It was not fair. Did the fates have no pity, then? It was not fair.

He looked at the black lake. Though the moon shined heavy in a cloudless sky, there was no light that was going to penetrate that water. It was some sort of living symbol of the soulless poverty he had just plummeted into with this rare, strange bird of a woman. This harlot; this alien.

“I don't want to. Do I have a choice?”

She looked at him quizzically for a moment. And then she said, “what have I done to you? Have I unleashed a beast in you Tanner? Is that what happens when men get too close to me? You know, that man that I was talking to on the phone? Just before I gave you head?”

“Yes. The man on the phone.” He looked down. He could feel somehow that after tonight his life would never be the same again.

“What man?” She turned and began to walk back to the car. He grabbed her arm, ferociously, for a second, and with a strength he would not have accorded himself, he spun her around until she was face to face with him.

He could see then, the terrible aspect of her great beauty, how she must have used it in a supernatural measure to grasp the souls of men, and crush them for what they were worth. And she had done it time and again.

Even a man as naive as himself could see that.

“Why do you want me to help you kill? Can’t you do it yourself? You don’t strike me as the kind who couldn’t do it herself.”

She smiled. She didn’t know the reason herself. She was going on instinct.

And, truthfully, don’t we all?

He sat belching beer in the ratty old chair in front of the tube. It was fight night, the old lady gone to do her waitress gig, and he left to his own devices. With sports. With pornography. With all of the necessities of a well-rounded intellectual diet.

It was 2004, and he had no idea what had become of ten years of living. Or, existing, at any rate. He had stuck it out with her, Joan, because he had stuck it into her. A resultant pregnancy later, and everything he had ever hoped and dreamed of had gone running through his fingers as if he had just taken a monstrous runny shit in his own hands. And the kid hadn’t even lived to be five. Ironic.

It had been a drunk driver, and his own dear sweet daughter whom he detested like a pile of angry flies was swept from this world and all of it’s woes, and buried rather unceremoniously beneath a tree in the darkest patch of the children’s cemetery. He had been permanently crippled, offered a government paycheck, and had become, increasingly, a burden to his skinny, neurotic, grieving Joan, who lived on pills, cheap cigarettes and bad romance novels.

It was television that offered him his own respite, occasionally, from the world of horrid drabness that seemed to encircle him in it's joyless embrace. Tonight it was going to be the San Francisco Padres playing, but any other night it might be the plastic-surgery addled visage of some pathetic actress. Or cop shows.

His name was Bill, he of the lusty belch.

There was a knock at the door, which was damn peculiar for eleven-thirty at night, but he managed to hobble from the chair with his four-claw cane and make his way over to the window. He looked out. Nobody. He scanned the darkness warily for a moment.

Damn. What if it was some sort of drug fiend or gang member? The resounding knock re-asserted itself. He crept over to the spy-hole.

He breathed a sigh of relief. It was Neighbor Roger.

He opened the door slowly. Fear had been replaced by consternation.

"Can I help you, Roger?" he said, as if he wanted to do nothing of the sort.

"Uh, yeah, uh Bill, I was wondering, um, well---my t. v. is on the fritz, and I was wondering if maybe you could use some company while you were watching the game. I know I should have called first, but, ah..."

Oh great, thought Bill, all I need is fucking Roger over here drinking my beer, eating my fucking food.

But he said, "sure...sure thing Rog. Um, just come on in, make yourself at home."

Neighbor Roger, who was forty, divorced, perpetually broke, and always smelled, faintly, of b.o. walked unsteadily into the living room.

He sat down on the rumpled couch, taking out a cheap cigar, and thanking heavens that Bill had never much had the courage to say know to anyone.

“Uh, hey, can I get a beer, old buddy?”

Bill stiffened. He already had anticipated that.

“Uh...look, Rog, I uh...well, the fact is, is that Joanie is getting off early tonight, see...and though, you know, I want you stay and all, I don't know how she would feel if she came home and found you passed out on the couch or something.”

Roger looked at him a minute from underneath the lid of his bushy brows. He gave a quaint little smile, as if to say, *“look whose done been pussy-whipped, good buddy. I wouldn't have thought it of you. I don't know what the hell this world is coming too, anyway, when regular guys like us can't even get together and have a few a few beers and watch the game without some bodies old lady getting uptight about it.”*

Roger leaned forward on the couch, thrust one huge, gnarled hand into the fold of his bomber jacket, and took out a small paper sack.

“Yeah, good buddy, I thought of that. So I thought maybe I'd bring over something to maybe help sweeten the whole night out a little. Lookey here---”

He took from the contents of the sack one pornographic videocassette and one tiny, miniscule bag of what, presumably, was marijuana.

“Ya got me, doc. I ran out of beer, and I had a little smoke left, so I thought maybe I'd bring it over and share with you.”

Bill sighed, and sat down with a plop that might have been a forced fart.

“Aw...fuck Joanie,” he said finally. “A couple valium and she'll be happy again.”

Six

“Where in the fuck is he? It's eleven-thirty. I could kill that little twerp!”

Gary sat in the upstairs office of Delcino's Sports Bar, brooding. Tanner Benjamin had, predictably, decided to take the

entire evening off. That was not the agreement. That was not the plan. That was a serious breach of the mores and folkways established between himself, and that little ogre.

He looked out the long two-way mirror at the crowded floor. It was Saturday night, it was party time, and they were one man short in the kitchen. That made an already hot, miserable environment that much worse. It was the hostility factor. Every time he had gone downstairs and into the back he could feel it: unhappy employees. It was not what he needed. It was serious violation of---

"The mores and folkways...Tanner Benjamin, you are in serious violation of the *folkways*."

Three hours from now, Rachel Wasserman would be choking on his monster cock, drunker than a dorm full of sorority sisters, and he would forget about the dickless wonder with the ho-hum expression that had no-showed and left him one man short in the kitchen. He saw this phrase in his mind as if it had been lit up like a Las Vegas sign: ONE MAN SHORT IN THE KITCHEN. It made him want to shit on somebody's head.

He put his palm out and punched it with his curled fist. Daddy had always said you couldn't trust short guys. "They're just a tad more vicious, a little sneakier, and psycho. Watch out: they'll hit you when you're not looking, sport."

And Daddy was always right about these things.

And it stood to reason, didn't it? If you had a dick the size of a gum drop, weren't you much more likely to be hostile, to be sneaky, to be in violation of the...mores? To not give a fart in a high wind about the *folkways*?

But it was okay. He was already fired. Tanner Benjamin was NOT a "team player". Delcino's was all about "team players." It was all about the *mores*.

(He had heard all about mores and folkways in that stupid fucking sociology class he had to take to graduate. The professor, Milt Seebaum, was a skinny, pencil-necked dweeb that must have been on the high side of sixty. But that was okay, because he was

getting an A+ in Sociology. He made damn sure Milt Seebaum knew that in advance.)

Gary sighed. It was gonna be a long damn night, but he knew what he had to do. As a Manager. As the guy that the boss depended on to make sure everybody hat was drinking here on Saturday left their cares and concerns at the door. It was his job to see that they ate the grill to ashes, drank themselves to stupefaction, and bathed in each others sweat out on the floor. This was America, after all.

He walked over to the closet behind his desk and popped open the door. Out in a cat walk area over the ceiling were several boxes of uniforms. He picked an appropriate shirt and an apron. Fun.

“One man short in the kitchen, one short man in the kitchen.” he sang to himself.

He scratched his balls. He laughed.

One short man in the kitchen.

“Not!”

He walked downstairs to the dish pit.

“Hey Milt, how are your classes going?”

Milt Seebaum looked down and saw the little, dainty, form of Patricia Ireland standing in front of him. It was unlike her to be attending a university theatre performance, but he let it slide.

“Any hidden pools of genius to be tapped?”

He laughed.

“Fraid not, Pat. It’s been all downhill since the sixties, I’m afraid. I didn’t know you went in for theatrics.”

“Oh,” she laughed. “I like to catch a play now and again. Besides, not like I have much else to do on Saturday night.”

She suddenly got a kind of sly little look on her face.

“Say Milt, how about a little night cap, old boy? Talk about the play? Hmm?”

Pat had a way about her of making even the most

innocuous suggestion sound like a coarse joke. Milt started to say no.

Then he thought about the lonely living room. The cold bed. The TV. dinner and the old copy of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, which he had read three times.

“Sure. Why not. The night is young. Let’s show these whipper snappers they aren’t the only ones who know how to spend a Saturday night. But why don’t we eat a bite first? I’m feeling a little dizzy, child.”

Pat grabbed his arm. He marveled to feel the strength of her grasp.

It was sometime later that they pulled up into the low-lying expanse of a darkened, run-to-riot neighborhood. They sat in the car for a few moments, and Tanner collected himself.

Everything seemed to be happening too fast. Fast motion. Time to slow down, take things cool, make up some excuse to have to go home. He was going to be a chicken shit, and, right now, being a chicken shit seemed like the safest possible way to operate.

“Uh, uh, Sabrina.” Pause. “I don’t think I can...”

He trailed off, letting his words lose themselves in the cramped, stale air of the filthy car. It seemed like this night would never end. And what time was it? He started to look down at his watch, thought better of it, and instead looked out at the house they were parked across the street from.

It was a modest house gone to seed in a neighborhood that must have, long ago, seen better days. Inside, what perfect drones were still alive would be nestled all snug in their beds, watching der wittle TV’s, thinking the same series of dull thoughts. What to eat. What to wear. Who to fuck.

Was he even a part of any of it?

“I can understand if you’re scared, Tanner. Really I can.”

He could tell by the sound of her voice that she was lying,

rubbing his inadequacies in. She had tasted his soul for one white hot moment, and now she was using that fact against him, using her sex as a means of leverage. Tanner wanted to weep.

The neighborhood looked strangely cold, even though the evening was warm. It seemed to have collected its odd assortment of strange, broken little dwellings the way a Victorian showman might have collected hydrocephalic twins.

It was hard to imagine there was actual life here.

“What if we get caught, Sabrina? Jesus, I can’t believe this, I don’t even know who the fuck you are, yet here I am.”

“Funny, huh. Do you trust me?”

Pause.

“No. Not at all.”

She smiled, then let her hand stray over to his lap.

“Then the feeling is mutual.”

Suddenly, she was on top of him, grinding, running her fingers through his hair savagely. She opened his mouth with her tongue, jabbing it down his throat in one delicious, wet thrust.

He had her jeans down in bare minutes, clutching her as she unzipped him, and they managed to guide him in. They began to rock, furiously, and she kept asking him, her voice rising to a piercing shriek, and then falling suddenly in husky guttural, “do you trust me? No...Do you trust me?...no... No! No! Ah, ah, ah!”

He managed to bounce her meager frame with increasing violence, feeling the warmth of her womanhood spread out across her lap. Suddenly, she thrust her arms over her head, and her blouse was hastily flung aside. Her breasts were much larger than he had first realized, and glistened with sweat in the moonlight. This was perfect, he reckoned. This was ecstasy. This was how sex was meant to be.

She forced him to stop for agonizing moments, long enough to lean against the dashboard, and kick her legs up and to the left in a position that made it, miraculously, possible for her to take off her skintight jeans, as well. Now she was as naked as the

day she was born, in his arms, in a parked car in the middle of some quaint neighborhood.

Suddenly, the intense dementia of absolute intoxicating pleasure exploded behind his eyes, and erased all doubts. He came furiously, screaming her name, crushing her taut torso to his own.

She rolled off of him a moment later, his seed dribbling from between her legs.

“Do you trust me now?”

He looked at her. He was bathed in sweat, gasping, shivering in the post-orgasmic glow.

“No. But...I’ll do what you say. If you can do that for me again.”

She reached over and stuck her finger between his slackened lips.

“Anytime. Now...”

She pulled out the nickel-plated revolver. It looked as evil as death in the darkness.

Bill and Roger sat on the couch, merrily stoned. The ball game had been completely forgotten. On the television screen, a young woman was bent down on all fours while several men had sex with her.

“Hey good buddy, I sure am glad you came over now...” Bill sounded as if he had just woke up from a deep sleep and found himself in someone else’s house. His statements were punctuated by a kind of sniggering, choking laughter, and then long moments of silence where he simply maintained stoically and looked as if he was undergoing a wave of paranoia.

Roger had tossed back much of Bill’s beer by now, and was enjoying the video. The young women on the video was getting a good screwing by some biker buddies of his...real classy gents. Real men.

They called that sort of party a *turning out*.

“Hey man, get me another beer.”

Bill blubbered for a minute. He was somewhere between laughter, panic, and real annoyance at being talked to like a slave in his own goddamn house. But Roger, quite frankly, had always sort of made him nervous. Even when he came by to do “odd jobs”, or help with remodeling the house. Roger made him nervous. His hands were too big, rough, his muscles still discernible beneath a few extra pounds of American Fat.

He sputtered, “well...get it yourself, motherfucker.”

He had sounded amiable, but Roger said,

“No. Don’t think so Bill. Not this time. I want you to get it for me. See, I don’t think you know who I am. Man, I could order your head in a basket, Bill. That’s a fact. I use to ride with the Outlaws, man.”

Bill was stoned, but he wasn’t stoned enough, at this point, to not know that Roger was fully-capable of beating the hell out of him. And Roger had been to jail before. And he must have already been half-lit when he came over.

“ See Bill, I just like to see your fat, crippled ass waddle over to the fridge. It makes me horny.”

Bill burst out laughing.

“This ain’t a joke, Bill. Now go get me a goddamn beer before I break the only bones in your face that ain’t ugly. Now.”

Bill got up, the entire room dancing circles around him, and if he had been any less lucky than what he already was, he would have keeled over onto the carpet in a useless heap and let Roger Atkins stomp his head into the floor with one size eleven shoe. He made it into the kitchen, barely, lights exploding in front of his eyes. He reached for the handle of the fridge, and as stoned and drunk as he was, he understood, in an imperfect way at that point, that he had just been humiliated. But the dope addled content of his brain hadn’t yet put the reality of the situation together in a way that was absolutely coherent. He turned.

For a moment, he almost forgot what he was doing. As he had turned, it was as if he had trails of tiny cartoon stars and

sparkles engulf him. He thought that if he simply kept twisting around, he might be able to conjure enough of them to lose himself in their strange magnificence.

“Hey Bill, what’re you doing? What about my beer?”

Then he remembered Roger, and he moved, with much difficulty, forward over the dirty linoleum.

“Hey Bill, old buddy, did I ever tell you about the time I fucked your wife?”

Sabrina had simply climbed from the car, naked as a jaybird, and walked calmly across the street, as if she had already been programmed for this particular assassination (he no longer had much doubt this was what it was going to be.) Her white body looked surreal, framed against the image of the suburban front porch; even stranger, considering that she was carrying the gun.

She had, he thought, at least stopped to slip her shoes on before she got out. He smiled, in spite of things. Maybe this was just some sort of bizarre joke.

She walked up the darkened driveway, and a motion light suddenly came on, flooding the entire scene in stark, white visibility. She turned, put her arms up as if to suggest surprise or joy, and then motioned for him to follow. He got out of the car on wobbling legs, shaking. He was sure he was going to end up in jail before the night was over.

Fuck it. Fuck it. It was too late. He didn’t know what he was doing. He was starting to actually enjoy the fear. It was more exhilarating, at least, than his typical apathy.

He walked slowly. As he approached her, his eyes took in every single contour of that perfectly erotic form. She seemed ready-made for pleasing men, a body that might have belonged to any super-model and a shock of the thickest raven hair that could be conceived. And her face had an animalistic sexuality that was hypnotic; it was an arch of the brow, a come hither look from the dark, dark eyes that you were able to lose yourself in.

I am going to commit a possible major felony with a woman that I haven't even known for an entire day. What in the hell is happening? Is any of this real?

As he approached her, walking slowly up the incline of the driveway, she seemed like a goddess. Like she had ridden the beam of that motion light across celestial space to be here with him. He could hear his heart beat in his ears.

Tanner Benjamin had been alive for twenty-seven years.

In twenty seven years he had seen, or so he thought, just about everything that there was to see. And what he hadn't seen in person, he had seen on TV. That was good enough. That was real enough.

His experience with violence was that it was usually aimed from the stronger to the weaker. Funny, he thought, the way that that happened. If you were small, if you minded your own business, and God knew, if you wear perfectly innocent, you had just better watch it. You had it coming.

The guys that he knew that meted violence were, invariably, always the same type: macho bonehead guys with big peckers and no brains. Guys that got all the girls.

Those guys sometimes ended up in prison. Invariably, really, if they couldn't channel their testosterone-driven rage into something that society looked upon with favor. Like a cop. A soldier. A hired thug.

This was the way of the world. It had always been thus. He did not know if it had ever been any different, but he knew one thing:

The little guy always got it in the ass.

So when Sabrina had walked, calmly, naked breasts bouncing, up to the front door that was just then opening slowly, cautiously, and then asked at gunpoint if she could enter, he knew that he had just seen something in real time up front that he had never seen before in his life.

He followed quickly, losing himself in the sheer absurdity of the moment. All sound seemed to have been blacked out by the heavy thump of his own beating pulse in his ears.

He saw a large, rough-looking man bound off of the couch in the unkempt living room and began to make flapping movements with his jaw. He was screaming something, but Tanner had no idea what, because the next sound was the sharp report of the pistol as it exploded outward into the reeking air.

The large man's head exploded outward over his left ear, splattering the wall behind him with brain matter and grue. He plummeted backward as solid as a felled tree. There was no more movement.

For the first time Tanner noticed that a corpulent, terrified little man was trying desperately to hobble to his withered legs and escape. He crawled on his hands and knees, whimpering and pleading, and Sabrina followed, stalking him like a psychotic, blood-freaked alley cat. He pushed open the kitchen door with one savage thrust of his meaty arm, and Sabrina let the door swing almost closed before she fired through it. Her dappled ass drew taut at each recoil.

Tanner stood in the former living room, now dying room, with his jaw dropped to his chin. It had all been so fucking easy for her to do. He had never known that meting out death could be so quick, so

painless, so easily accomplished without consideration aforethought. He approached the man on the living room floor cautiously. He wasn't sure that he wasn't dreaming.

"Hello...uh, hello. Sir?"

The face that he looked into had been frozen in a moment of time, the death-agony written on the face in a permanent rictus of shock. He had no idea what this big sonofabitches crime had been, but he knew one thing for certain now: he had paid the price.

Tanner began to throw up convulsively, heaving up a yellowish pussy substance mixed with the coffee he had drank

earlier, upon awakening. He turned from the body and let loose in a puddle near the television. On the television, the same skinny young woman was still being fucked senseless by the mongrel horde of seemingly never-ending male porn sidekicks.

The gritty camera zoomed in close, capturing the twitching spasms of her face. Tanner dropped to his knees, trying to evacuate the last of the spew from his gut. When he looked up, he realized for the first time why they had come here at all.

The woman on the screen was clearly Sabrina.

She then came out of the kitchen, saying nothing, but seeming full of contempt at his weakness. Tanner got up shakily, slowly, and approached the woman as if she might be a coiled serpent.

“Why?”

It was all he could think to say. He was literally, for the first time in a long while, beyond even the capacity to be frightened. Now, he found himself simply filled with wonder at what had just transpired in front of his own eyes.

The naked woman stepped to the side, and with one arm swung open the bullet-ridden kitchen door. Tanner was too stunned, at this point, to do anything but giggle.

The little man, the little fat cripple, had crawled to, of all place, the refrigerator, and had grasped the door handle. He must have become confused, thought he was at the back door. She had him cornered, the gun held out tight in her beautiful, long fingers. He had managed to raise his bulk a few inches from the linoleum tiles, a look of absolute transcendent agony written on his fleshy face. It had pulled the refrigerator door ajar, with him hanging from the handle by both hands, in his death pose.

Then she had shot him twice. Blood flooded the yellow kitchen tiles in slow, slurping slicks...creating a little river of gore beneath the oddly-hanging body. His fingers had tightened in death until, hours later, it would take the morgue wagon guys

much prying to get them loose from the refrigerator door handle. They would comment later how it seemed grimly humorous to see the fat man die trying to lift himself. It was comparable to the woman who died standing up. He realized, half-humorously, that they were going to have to draw the chalk outline halfway up the fridge door.

One for Ripley.

To make matters worse, Sabrina had stepped in the blood, and lazily left red foot prints---everywhere.

They both turned of the lights, locked the doors, and left as quickly and painlessly as they had come. It was over.

Before they had left, Sabrina had carefully wiped up her feet with paper towel, which she had then simply thrust to the floor. She had then mussed her footprints, but Tanner, still struck speechless realized that they must have left evidence all over the place. All over.

They walked, almost as if they were having a mutual dream, slowly back to the car. Sabrina put on her clothes, and began to drive.

Seven

Milt Seebaum followed Pat Ireland into her little apartment, noting the soft smell of womanhood as it rose to greet his nostrils. His own place never smelled like that, he thought bitterly.

Inside, the refuse of an over-intellectual woman that had sublimated her femininity in a pile of boring course work, lay scattered around the dim room. Text-books lay half open, revealing diagrammatical constructions that were as perplexing as the inside of Pat Ireland's head. Mountains of papers were stacked precariously upon a flimsy computer desk. A few dirty dishes rounded everything out.

It was a normal, boring, compact place; the place a thirty-three year old faculty member might be expected to live. There were framed posters of The Beatles, and a screen saver of Stonehenge. There was the regulation poster of the Eiffel Tower bought in Paris. It was bourgeois chic.

"Make yourself comfortable Milt. Want something to drink?"

He felt the first few stirring of excitement grip him. How long had it been since he had been offered a drink by a young woman?

"Sure," he said as evenly as possible. He was getting a little nervous now. What was she expecting him to say, "hell no"?

"How about a beer? It's what's handy."

"Oh, a beer would be just fine I think." *Who am I kidding*, he thought, *I usually go to bed with warm milk.*

"Here, I have Dosequis, and I hope you like it...I like it." She came back into the living room and sidled up on the rattan couch. The coffee table in front of them was cluttered as everything else, bearing a heap of periodicals and fluff magazines that must have been a weakness for Pat Ireland.

"You know, Pat," Milt Seebaum began warily, "you are the only person I know who keeps *Sassy* and *The New England Journal of Literary Science* in the same place".

Pat seemed nonplussed. To be perfectly honest, she hadn't brought Milt Seebaum here to talk about magazines.

"Oh, I don't know...one's just as interesting as the other don't you think?"

"Oh...I don't think either one of them could be accused of being very interesting. My personal favorite is *Field and Stream*."

"Mm, really? Never saw you as much of an outdoor type, Milt. Thought you'd be cloistered away in some dark corner with the *American Journal of English Literature*...something academic, intellectual, respectable. You are respectable, aren't you?"

She lifted her beer, polished it off, and asked if he wanted some wine. He had barely taken two sips of his Dosequis.

‘Wine? Uh, sure, yeah...you know Pat, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were trying to get me drunk and take advantage of me.’

She said nothing, but got off the couch slowly, keeping him in her gaze in a steady, feline way that excited him terrible. She disappeared into the kitchen, and he gazed around the room in elated panic. There was something about being made drunk in the presence of some strange woman, even a woman as boringly familiar as Pat Ireland. Oh, he already knew the game was afoot, yesiree. Didn’t even have to worry about playing his cards right, did he? She was in the driver’s seat.

She came back out a few moments later, carrying a bottle of cheap (read: undrinkable) wine, and two bell-shaped glasses.

‘Take. Drink. Relax...mm, that’s good.’ She sipped casually on the white wine. Drink enough of it, and even Milt Seebaum looked like Fabio.

Milt took some wine, some beer, and some more wine. His head was pounding. His heart felt like a little ticker ticker machine. He absent-mindedly worried about his blood pressure.

‘You know Milt, I have some ulterior motives in inviting you over. I hope you don’t think I’m being too forward, but, uh, well...I don’t quite know how to say...’

He gulped. He leaned forward. He hadn’t been intimate with a woman in a dozen years. It was all part and parcel of being a tall, hook-nosed, living equivalent of Ichabod Crane. It went with the professional territory

‘Y-you want to have intercourse.’ He slurred, leaning forward a little too much. The alcohol always did have a heavy effect on him, and he never, really, drank.

‘W-well, jeezus, Milt, you sure have a romantic way of putting it! How about: I would like to have a romantic fling with an older, attractive co-worker? Is that okay?’

She laughed. She moved closer to him on the couch. He could feel her hot breath play against the side of his neck. He was

old enough to be her father. What was the game here?

“Why me, Patricia? Why in the world would a young, attractive woman like you want some crusty, doddering old fool like me?”

She rubbed his neck with her index finger, and smiled.

“Well, let’s just say that there’s something about a man’s mind that attracts me. And, Milt, baby, nobody has a mind quite like yours. You know it. It’s like you stepped out of a time warp.”

Time warp, he thought. That is exactly right. I don’t belong here. I belong in some moldy library, holding hands with Longfellow. Well, here I am. Now what?

He started to shrink away from her.

“Patricia...now, I don’t exactly rush into these things. Never have, never will...”

Suddenly, she lunged on top of him, pressing him down, her mouth flowering open across his own. He was quite liquid now, groping her tightly, madly, the blood rushing to his head. His heart beat like a drum.

“O-okay. I understand. I’m a male rape victim.”

They both began to laugh.

Fuck Longfellow, he thought, and pulled her close to him.

It was in the bedroom, in the darkness, where they had finally cast aside their clothes, and really got into heated, manic love-making. Milt had never thought such intense passion could be mustered on a Saturday night. It hadn’t in years, seemed like a possibility that was open.

Later, as they lay in the darkness, letting the spent passion of the evening linger in the air like some rapidly dissolving force of electricity, he asked Patricia again, why, in fact, she had chosen to be with him.

“Because. There was just something about you that seemed, I dunno, promising. Special. Different...like you weren’t just out for a piece of ass and a good meal. Like you made love the way you wrote...or, at least, from what I’ve read of you. You

know women and poets.”

“You weren’t too bad yourself, dear. I don’t think I’ve had a night like this within recent memory.”

“It doesn’t have to be the only time. Honestly. We can do it again. Tonight. If you want.”

She curled up next to him, and he pulled her close with one skinny arm. He still felt troubled. In fact, the feeling was actually increasing as the pleasure wore off.

“But is this really right? I mean, I mostly pride myself on my ability to keep one notch above the rest of the real, raw, world. Do you know what I mean? I’m old. I’m not sure I don’t...I dunno.”

“Feel like a shit heel? Immoral? Surely, two adults can jump right in the sack and not worry a damn about it. ‘Fraid of committing a little white sin?”

He felt glum for a moment. He wasn’t sure she was ever going to be able to understand him.

“Well, damnit, you said it yourself: it’s as if I stepped out of a time warp. I’m an old fuddy-duddy. A gentleman. I don’t just jump into bed with anyone out of pure animal *lust*.”

He had a half-mocking, half-serious tone in his voice, but she could tell he was masking some small regret.

She made a *ptui* sound with her lips, and said, “ Oh, Mr. Uptight Prude, are you afraid I’ve set you on the cold, hard path toward becoming a womanizer? We’re you raised Catholic?”

“No.”

“Well then, as long as I’m not a choir boy, what are you worried about?”

In truth, he could think of nothing.

They drove through the interminable night, the rode stretching out before them in endless sameness. Mile after mile, the yellow dividing line sweeping past in blurring disarray, the expanse of darkened farmland picturesque with rotting barn and fence post making the evil night seem as deep and dark and

bottomless as the pits of hell that Tanner Benjamin thought, surely, must be waiting for him below.

She held the wheel in a tight little grip. She didn't seem to even be slightly aware of the full ramifications of the brutal double-murder she had just performed. He corrected himself. That *they* had just performed.

He was an accomplice after the fact.

He was going to prison---no ifs, ands, or buts about it. He wondered what it would be like, confined for life in a sweaty, filthy cage with large, brutal men forcing him to do horrible, painful, humiliating things that he scarcely wanted to imagine.

He had once read a prolonged, torturous article on prison rape. It had made him physically nauseous for several hours afterward. *And, let's face it*, he thought, *if I go in, they're going to make me a bitch.*

He suddenly cried out, as if he had just realized the full importance of what had transpired.

"How in the hell can you be so calm at a time like this? Do you realize when they catch us, what they're going to do to us? Sabrina! You just killed two men in cold blood!"

He was actually screaming now. He was terrified, felt like he was on the verge of some sort of complete breakdown. Then he thought that that might be the best thing.

Maybe he could cop an insanity plea and end up in an institution.

He continued to yell for a few minutes, and so she began to yell too. So he yelled louder. And on. And on.

Until, finally, she brought the car to a screeching halt at the side of the road. She popped on the dome light.

"Tanner! Tanner, calm the fuck down. Calm the fuck down, or I will shoot you. Do you hear me, Tanner? I will shoot you now, and dump you out here in the middle of flying saucer country, and nobody will know the difference."

He stared at her in amazement. He knew she wasn't bluffing. He felt ice water pump through his veins. When was this

night going to end?

“Tanner, do you see anyone fucking following us? Do you?”

She spoke sharply. He shook his head no, too scared to make a peep.

She breathed in. She breathed out.

“Now, the reason that you see no one following us is because nobody knows it was us. Or me. I’d take the fucking rap. I killed them. I did it. You didn’t know what was gonna go down, did you?”

He shook his head no, and slightly whimpered.

“Now, stop being a fucking baby. Nobody is gonna chase us down, tonight, or any other night, because nobody fucking cares. Okay? Now---”

And she shifted gears, and slowly got back out on the road.

“I am going to get some food. Okay? You too. You look like you could use some coffee, at least. There’s a diner up here, somewhere. Gonna be okay?”

He shook his head yes. He didn’t think he was ever going to be okay again.

She sat in the corner of her room, looking at the shadows dance on the wall. It was all she could say about the spectral fingers cast by the bushes in the moonlight. Those fingers danced; invited. She would use them to take her to sleep.

Sleep, all I really want. All I can really count on. The only comfort I have.

Downstairs, she could hear mommy fighting with Bruce. Big, stupid Bruce, who drank and stank and farted, and mommy thought was just great. Wonderful. Her new “daddy”.

Bruce, who drove a truck and watched wrestling, and sometimes looked at her in a way that scared the holy hell out of her, sometimes. But what did mommy care. When Bruce brought over dope, or money, or what have you. Mommy was in her own world these days.

Now she was yelling at him. Calling him a “worthless mother fucker”. Well, she could agree with that, at least.

She listened. All she could make out were a whole lot of cuss words, and something about Julie. Somebody (some *bitch*, to use mommy’s words) named Julie did something and now mommy was mucho pissed. Mucho. And mommy was, usually, pretty laid back.

Now, she could hear the door slam. It must have been Bruce, because she could hear mommy rush to the phone and dial up her friend Ronnie Hampton. Ronnie was sixteen and pregnant, and usually up for babysitting for the evening.

“H-hello? Mrs. Hampton. This is Jill Lavender. Um, I was wondering if Ronnie might be interested in coming over for a few minutes and keeping an eye on Lindsey. Yes, I know it’s late, but it’s an emergency. My father has taken ill again, and I really need to go and make sure he is okay. Can you put her on, please?”

Mommy had that “will not take no for an answer” sound in her voice that she used sometimes. Lindsey rolled over on her side and listened.

“Hi Ronnie, this is Jill. I know it might be kind of late to ask, but I need you to come over and keep an eye on Lindsey while I go out for just an hour or so. You can? Okay, okay great, oh thank you very much Ronnie, I really, really, owe you. Okay, I’ll be waiting. Bye.”

Lindsey could hear mommy downstairs rushing around, putting on her coat, grabbing up her billfold. Mommy thought that she must have been asleep, by now. Surely.

Lindsey rolled over on her back and stared out at the sky. The stars seemed like magnificent little dots in the heavens. She had read, somewhere, that some people thought that there might be life on other planets. She hoped that there was. Life. Somewhere. Else.

She looked at the swaying shadows on the wall. The branches of the trees outside. The fingers seemed to be curling around, seemed to be inviting her. To sleep. To dream.

Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake. I pray the Lord my soul to take.

She felt her lids grow heavy. Ronnie Hampton was nice. If she woke up early tomorrow, Ronnie would make her breakfast and watch cartoons with her till mommy felt like getting up.

She slept. It was bliss, in a world where mommies did what they were supposed to do. Always.

Bruce McGonnagill pumped the engine until it roared.

Speeding. He knew he had better cool his engines soon. But, damnit, that damn broad had made him sore tonight. Mad as hell, to be perfectly honest.

So, he got some on the side. Big deal. Wasn't like he was married to that mop, and even if he was, so what? He was a man. He was just following his biological prerogative.

He chased down an alley, pumped it again, came out the other side with a screech, blowing gravel. What the hell was he doing? Was he just going to ride around like some aimless fuck till dawn. No.

Bruce had been in jail twenty times for twenty different things. It didn't much matter to him if he got pulled over or not. What the fuck. Go for broke. Live fast and die young. It was the way of the beast.

He popped the tab on a Bud and set it in the crotch of his jeans. He was gonna scout for some pooter tonight. Hot stuff, something young. Something to throw in that mops face, and make her see that she needed *him*. He didn't fucking need her.

"No sir. Not me. Not this tiger."

It seemed like the road was never going to end. Above them, the stars were strewn in galactic wonderment, shining their naked truth down upon a midnight world where life had stopped making sense for Tanner Benjamin.

What time was it?

He strained down to look at his watch. Dumbfounded. He told himself he must be hallucinating. All of it. He looked up. He looked out the passenger window. He looked over at the psychopathic woman who sat behind the wheel of the car. She seemed as stern, as impenetrable as an iron case. Could it be true? Could it?

Could all of this really have transpired in only. Forty. Five. Minutes.

Bugs jumped up and splattered on the windshield in the American night.

“Here is where we are going Tanner. Hope you like.”

Up ahead, in the distance, set on the side of the road like a location from some cheap movie, the Roadside Café was lit civilization, and surrounded by hillbilly getaway cars. And a few cop cars. And he still had some blood on his palms.

But by this time he was beyond thinking of himself as anything but a hostage.

“Yeah. I guess that’s okay. What could happen?”

“You could eat.”

“I could also puke.”

But surprisingly, he did eat.

She pulled in much too quickly, squealing tires, and must have brought not a few heads up to peer out the long diner window. She turned off the car. This bitch seemed to be daring someone to hassle her.

Tanner got out on shaky legs, saying nothing. He noticed, immediately, that there was a Volkswagen bug parked where there shouldn’t have been. Hillbilly’s, as far as he knew, never drove Volkswagen bugs.

Through the door. Into the dining room. No wait to be seated. Just sit. Smoking section. The fluorescent lights hurt his eyes, making him wince. He imagined he looked as if he just spent the last three days smoking crack.

They sat. A very tired waitress approached a moment later. She had tremendous dark circles under her eyes. She automatically placed two empty mugs and a pot of coffee in front of them and got out her little pad.

“Help y’all?”

He looked at the menu. It might as well have been written in Chinese.

“Um yeah, I will have steak and eggs. And my friend here will have...what will you have, friend?”

She looked at him expectantly.

“Steak. And eggs. Over easy.”

His voice was a little pip.

She looked up at the waitress, handed her the menu, and said, “he’s tired, is all.”

The woman heaved a gusty sigh, and said, “ain’t we all, hon. It’s been a long night.”

The woman walked away quickly. Tanner scanned the smoking section, trying to avoid looking at Sabrina.

It was a typical Saturday night at the Roadside. Big beards. Loud drunks. Several scantily clad barmaids drying out with their grubby, macho bonehead daddy’s. And five people that did not belong in the picture at all.

In the booth across the aisle from them, a large woman with a Civil War-era cap puffed an immense curled carved pipe of antique origins. Next to her sat a pallid, lanky young man with a fishing cap and a scruffy beard. His hair was pulled into two pony-tail strands. He was much too “tree-hugger” to be smoking his little wooden pipe in this dive.

They both seemed to be busily grilling a third party seated across from them. A little weasel of a fellow with a sock cap. Short, stocky, smoking one right after the other. They seemed like they had him under arrest.

Tanner could only catch brief hints of the conversation, but it all seemed to revolve around ghosts. Or flying saucers. Or whether or not the little man was “crazy”, “doing something

dangerous”, Or whether or not “Jack Cards” had something to do with something.

“Tanner,” Sabrina leaned over the table, exposing quite a bit of her braless bust, and whispered. “That guy looks just like you.”

Tanner considered.

“Not a chance,” he said. What the hell. He had some pride left.

The other two people had come in just after them. A short, frazzled-looking woman that looked as if she had hurriedly thrown on her outfit and make-up. She was walking with a purposeful strut in front of a much older man, who looked, for all the world, like the portraits of the famous Rhode Island horror writer H.P. Lovecraft. Mixed with a dash of Jimmy Stewart, and a smidge of a young Don Knotts. The man seemed like he had just about spent all of his energy already that evening. Tanner knew, exactly, how he felt.

Suddenly, he realized who it was. Milt Seebaum. His favorite college professor. What in the hell was he doing here at this hour? And with her?

Before he knew it Tanner was already up, and moving slowly toward his old Prof, in a kind of half-sleepy disbelief.

“Professor? Professor Seebaum?”

The couple had seated themselves at a little table in the corner. The man stiffened, and turned around slowly. Sure enough, it was old Milty. His face seemed to lose all blood.

“Uh...hey, there, um. Mr...I can't seem to.”

Milt fumbled for some words, eager to brush him off. Tanner looked in his eyes, saw they were bloodshot, and wondered what the hell Milt Seebaum of all people was doing out on a Saturday night drunk with some young broad. Or some younger broad, at any rate.

“Tanner, sir. Tanner Benjamin. I was in your two oh one class. Remember? I'll never forget that class, sir. Great class.”

Milt Seebaum fumbled for a bit more than said, "Oh, oh yes. Mr. Benjamin, I believe. A good student, you were. Always punctual."

He looked at Tanner with a face that said he was desperately trying to think of something else to say. Tanner turned and started to walk away, when the woman that was with Seebaum suddenly chirped up and said, "Why don't you invite your girlfriend over and sit with us. Looks like we're both here for the same reason."

The resultant meal was an amalgam of the bizarre, surreal, and the ferociously mundane. It was strikingly, brutally comic, and in it's intense nothingness it shocked Tanner into a new sense of the highly absurd and grotesque.

"Um, so are uh, I don't think we have been introduced..."

"Sabrina. Sabrina Sabrina."

"Sorry...didn't catch that last name."

"Uh, *Sabrina*."

Munch. Chomp. Cough.

"Um Tanner, so what have you been doing with yourself lately? Any luck kick-starting the old writing career?"

"Well, to be perfectly honest Prof, not much. I've been scribbling a few things here and there. Mostly poetry."

Slurp. Chew. Cough.

"Poetry does not pay the bills, young man."

"I know...but what else do we have?"

"So are you two, an *item*?"

Pat Ireland seemed the most hopeful party sitting at the table.

"Well...you could say that we are old friends, really."

"Really? And what did *you* major in Sabrina?"

Silence.

"Well, it is getting late, Pat...maybe we had better leave these two kids to do their thing...go home, get some sleep."

Milt Seebaum looked as if he was on the verge of a minor

case of exhaustion. His skin looked as if it might be glossing over with a fresh coat of some thin, gray paint that was lurking just beneath his pores. He looked like he had been left out in the cold for two evenings running.

“No...really, you guys the night is young. Hey, does anyone want to go check out a haunted house? I know of a great place just out in the country a piece.”

“A piece? A piece of what?”

Pat Ireland turned toward Milt Seebaum and smiled the patient, tolerant smile of a patient, tolerant bourgeois liberal intellectual.

“Colloquialism, Milt...sometimes I think you live on another planet.”

Tanner was nearly about to keel over, but realized, once again with a sort of dawning horror that all that was standing between him and collapse, that he was, in fact, still a hostage.

“A haunted house? Sabrina, you didn’t mention anything about a haunted house.”

“Yes I did. Don’t you remember? I told you all about that crazy old family that was killed by the father all those years ago...I told you, on the way here, you snapper head!”

Pat and Milt looked at each other with a kind of vague bemusement, as if to say, *love is blind, and dumb, and deaf too, apparently.*

“Yes, well, it’s good to see that you’re alive and kicking Tanner...I must confess, out of all the students I have had in maybe the last five years, you alone seemed to always stand just a little above the rest. In effort, in ability. Please, take advantage of the talents you’ve been granted.”

And this from a guy that couldn’t remember me twenty minutes ago, Tanner thought bitterly, but let it slide. He had bigger things on his mind at the moment.

“So...about the haunted house?”

Milt Seebaum started to reply, more forcefully, that he was going home, but was cut short by Pat. Pat, who had just let him

sink his grizzled old tube steak between her plump little thighs, now apparently, had him by the psychological balls. She said, “Well, why not Milt? You said you needed some fun on Saturday night.”

“I...uh, that is, poking around some old place, in the middle of the night, does not sound like it would be much fun for me, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, come on, live a little...it’s what you need, Milty, you old fussy man.”

Already, Pat Ireland knows exactly what I need. I’m ruined.

But he couldn’t see any way out of it.

“Okay,” he sighed. “Let’s go see your house, and you can tell us all about it on the way there.”

Milt Seebaum spoke with the patient, tolerant tone of a father trying to console an idiot child. Sabrina looked as if she had just been handed a lollipop. Tanner sighed inwardly, filled with an apprehension not inconsistent with the events of the evening. Pat Ireland thought that a drive through the country might be fun.

You could not have asked for a more picturesque, beautiful night. Do you know what I mean when I say the sky looked as if it had been created for young lovers? Every star a beautiful pin-point of wonder against a curtain of deep black velvet. And Venus, that ascending master of the sky burned with the mystic fire that named it in the beginning, when the ancients where cataloging the heavens.

They were piled in Sabrina’s car, Sabrina’s idea, and Pat Ireland had thought that that was just fine. The two men blanched, but what could they do? It was the Season of the Witch.

Vroom. Vroom. Rattle. Bang.

Bug splatter of the night, bug guts on the windshield, not a cop in sight.

Where were all the cops, thought Tanner. In the donut shops?

It was hell bent for leather, and Sabrina swung the car around each turn wildly. The two older passengers began to regret, slightly, that they had not taken Pat's car. Pat's little VW bug. Pat's wheels were safety. Sabrina's wheels meant they might each end up in traction for six months, if not worse.

Farm fields as far as the eye could see. *Indiana is desolation, thought Tanner. Indiana is row after row of rotting barns and decrepit farmhouses. And in the midst of all this, the Breadbasket of America.*

What time is it?, 'Tanner thought madly. What the hell time is it?

But his trusty wrist watch had quit working.

"Professor Seebaum?"

"Uh, I think we can dispense with the formalities tonight Tanner...just plain old Milt will do."

"Okay...Milt, do you know what time it is?"

Milt Seebaum had a very nice digital watch worth about five dollars. It glowed in the dark.

"It says half past one."

Tanner could tell that neither of them could believe that.

Suddenly, with a screech of tires they were all thrown to the side, causing not a few groans and the first profanity that Tanner Benjamin had ever heard Milt Seebaum utter since he had known him.

Screech!

They were thrown forward as the car came to a violent halt in the weed-choked front yard of a dilapidated house that had not, it could be assumed, seen occupants in several decades. It sat like some ancient monolith of a bygone era, illuminated in the harsh moonlight. It brooded.

"Well...here we are."

It sat far back of the road, surrounded by a ring of trees that looked as equally dismal, and forlorn. An ancient tire swing still swayed gently in the breeze, perhaps remembering the jovial buttock of some young whipper snapper that was now old, or dead. They got out slowly.

“Wow,” said the ever-tolerant Pat. “So you say this place is really haunted, huh?”

“Sure is...there was a family back her in the fifties. They were a part of some strange religious group. I think they were called the Crabbites. Well, anyway, the father found out his wife was having an affair. He was really crazy, thought that God talked to him...use to speak in other voices. They had some other people living here with them, I think some cult members or something. Anyway, yeah he killed his wife and child, a little girl. Then, when the others found out...they all committed suicide. Some by knife, some by poison, some by rope.”

“Oh, how horrible...” Pat Ireland said the last word with the emphasis she usually reserved for moments when it was appropriate to think that some item that had just been related to her was, truly, tragic. In truth, she was more fascinated than anything.

The two women started toward the rickety porch. The windows, long broken, boarded-up, and otherwise really did seem, for an infernal moment, as if they were terrifying eyes spying the entrance of some foul intruders into their silent, vigilant domain.

“Pat, I don’t know if it’s a good idea to climb up on that porch...I mean, what if you fall through? Hospital’s miles away.”

“Oh, Milt, you old grandma, where’s your sense of adventure?”

Climb they did, and in a few minutes, with the aid of a flashlight that Tanner had no idea Sabrina had brought along with her, the men warily followed the women through the door.

The smell of feter and age was so overpowering and sickening, at first Tanner found it quite hard to accommodate himself. It was one noxious blast, and the accumulated dust of years made breathing labored. From the few glimpses the men got of the place from the flashlight beam, they could see that the furniture, from whatever period it had last been occupied, still remained; a grotesque and declining reminder that, once, this place had been habitable.

Sabrina rattled on non-stop, but Tanner paid little attention to her barrage of inanities. At least, Prof Ireland thought her to be interesting, and the two women rather followed each other further back into the darkness, chattering between themselves.

At his shoulder, in almost the decrepit doorway, stood Milt, breathing heavily, exasperated and totally spent. The alcohol he had smelled earlier was, probably, almost oxygenated by now.

“Door was probably locked...she must have come here earlier and forced it. You know, this is trespassing. If we get caught, there will be a stink. I don’t think Pat has thought of that. Uh, Tanner, can you do something with your girlfriend? Get us all back safe?”

“She’s... not my girlfriend, Milt. Tell you the truth, I’m not sure just what the hell she is.”

“How long have you known her?”

Tanner considered.

“Well, I’m not exactly sure at this point, Prof. But, I would guess, oh, about three hours now.”

Milt Seebaum choked. He didn’t want an explanation. Forty minutes later he had one, and it was not what he expected at all.

In the moonlit glow the place was, indeed, sepulchral. A Poe could not have conjured such living ghastliness. Tanner didn’t want to take more than a few steps away from the door, where Milt Seebaum cowered impatiently, ready for the cool comfort of his rumpled bed sheets, the softness of his pillows, the safety of his little hobbit-like hole. His books. His color TV. PBS. Warm milk. A full pipe. His classical CD collection.

“This has got to stop, soon.”

Tanner heard him mumble under his breath.

Bruce pulled into the parking lot of Jokers Wild, a local strip-delicatessen. It was Saturday night, and he knew his favorite girl would be here, shaking her tits for a bunch of horny old men that

couldn't stand looking at their wives naked after so many miserable years.

He finished off the last of his third beer behind the wheel, leaned over, reached into the glove box, and pulled out a nine millimeter pistol. He made sure it was loaded, got out, locked his truck, and strutted inside.

He was a big man, was Bruce McGonagill, and this was a rough place. And tonight, of all nights, was roughest. But he knew he could handle himself.

Just in case, though, he wanted some back-up. That's what the gun was for. If he found himself surrounded in the parking lot, or some group of black hoods tried to stop him as he drove through what amounted to the ghetto, he wanted to know he could reach in his glove box, and take out Mr. Safety.

Otherwise, he would beat the holy hell out of any man that wanted to merely *brawl*.

He walked though the dark wooden door, looked over at the bouncer, and noticed all his front teeth were missing. His kind of place.

He handed him five bucks, mumbled something, and as soon as naked flesh hit his eye he knew that he had made a wise decision in coming here. This was it. This was the center of male dominance. Naked women on display, to be treated like the sides of meat that they were.

He grinned. A lovely little thing in a g-string and pasties jiggled up to him and asked him if he would tip her.

"Sure thing, hon," he said, and reached for his wallet.

He made sure to slide the bill down the v of her crotch as far as physics would allow his fingers to go. She didn't bat an eyelash, but leaned over and pecked him on the cheek.

"Thanks."

He strode up to the bar. A woman that looked like Mrs. Captain Kidd was handing out beers in a can. No glasses. No glasses at all.

"I'll have a Bud." Bud was a man's beer.

She handed him over his beer, and he turned. A couple of short trolls were busy with a pool game. He wondered why anyone would come to a titty bar to play pool. He walked out to the stage.

A very young, long-legged woman was gyrating around a pole. Nothing new there, but he sat down anyway, put his beer on the counter, and leaned over. She crawled across to him, swaying, her tiny breasts pleasant. Inviting. Enticing.

“Hey, I’ve seen you around here before.”

The pounding music made conversation impossible, a series of droning yells.

She looked young enough to be his daughter. He liked that.

“Yeah...how much for a lap dance?”

“Ten dollars. Here, tip me.”

She thrust her pelvis in his face.

He dropped five bucks. Later he would drop over a hundred. Still later, he would hand over pretty much the contents of his entire wallet for the month.

Dad would be proud.

They had been upstairs for a very long time. Tanner and Milt had simply waited out on the rickety front porch, careful lest they should snag their clothes on a rusted nail.

“What do you think they’re doing? Do you think we should go up and get them?”

“I dunno. Do you want to risk it? We don’t have a flash light. I only have a lighter.”

“Damn it, I thought Pat was smarter than this.”

He reached up and rubbed his sagging face.

“Oh, I am so tired Tanner. I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but I rather wish we hadn’t run into either one of you this evening. Pat seems like the type that, if she has proper encouragement, can be convinced to stay on the straight and narrow. But, alas, my experience with women is sorely lacking.”

“Milt...you and me both. I don’t know exactly what is

happening tonight, but I wish I hadn't called in. Called in."

He said it again, suddenly, as if just realizing that he was now, most certainly, unemployed.

He felt like screaming: at himself, at Sabrina, the Devil Woman, at Milt Seebaum and his stupid, frumpy lover. And at the cicada chirp of a mid western midnight.

Gary was sweating bullets. Really sweating bullets. He wasn't use to being dish-bitch, and he didn't like it. It made him look inferior in front of his own employees. If that was possible.

Behind him, a thoroughly tattooed lummoX led the not-so-merry crew in another, ceaseless round of orders. The heat was a little breathtaking.

"We need two enchiladas, a super, a side of rounds, here's some more shit...some more shit...and some more shit. By god, I'll be a happy mother fucker when we close this bitch down tonight."

He handed out little slips of paper to various cooking stations. Waitresses in very tight white shorts began bringing back bus tubs full of sickening, filthy dishes. Outside, the voices of the crowd had risen to a general, ear-splitting roar.

"Gary, we are really getting backed-up up front. There's no more room to put anything used."

"I know, darlin'. I'm working as fast as I can."

In truth, he was. But the damn washer kept getting backed-up somehow. It had to be pestered with, the filter had to be dug out. Clots of half-chewed food held between his fingers. And every bit of it looked like a round, pugnacious, well-beaten Tanner Benjamin.

I'm gonna kill that little fuck. I'm gonna kill him when I see him. Tanner Benjamin, your ass is grass.

He slammed the lid of the washer down, heard the satisfying sound of the sprayer putter into action.

Outside, University Avenue was already a mass of young

bodies. Crowds: hanging out on the porch area, trudging down the sidewalks, loitering in front of the coffee shop. It was a hot, happy, drunk evening. It was loud.

Cars blasting ghetto rap. Young guys on the prowl. For booze, for sex, for fun. People chewed sandwiches, doffed beers, smoked cigarettes. It was typically a Saturday night in this rowdy, party college town. Lower-living wasn't simply tolerated tonight, it was encouraged. It was mandatory.

It was all about drinking yourself into the newest stupor. Did you care where you woke up the next day? Or with who? You paid, your body paid, but it made Monday classes seem so much more tolerable.

It was all loud. It was all life. It was right now, and here he was, doomed to work well past his typical shift, closing down a filthy place and ensuring he would be too wrecked, and it would be far too late (by about two hours) to really enjoy any of the campus festivities. He kept moving.

Bus tub. Empty. Dish rack. Spray. Close. Cycle. Open. Put away.

Go get another. He had it down now to a fine science. But, even as fast as he was moving, he still couldn't keep up. The waitresses were forced to bring quite a lot of them back too him.

Tanner! You shit! You stinking little shit.

What the hell time was it? It had to be close to closing the grill down.

The two women finally emerged from the darkness, rattling the floorboards.

Milt Seebaum turned around slowly, disgustedly, exhaustedly. Patricia Ireland was staggering, her eyes red. The smell of fresh marijuana smoke followed the women outside.

Milt finally had nothing to say. He was shocked into a new awareness. Patricia Ireland, for her part, could do little but stumble recklessly in the front yard, and giggle. It had been a few

years since she had last tasted the liquid sweet smoke of strong marijuana, and the effect was exhilarating. At this particular moment in time, Patricia Ireland found Sabrina to be, well, one cool chick.

“Pat...I didn’t come out with you tonight so you could smoke grass, and giggle like you were sixteen.”

“Milt, man...you sure got a *long* nose...man...”

Patricia Ireland could say little else that was coherent, and every incoherent statement was punctuated with the same ridiculous giggle.

Milt finally lost it. In the inimitably restrained fashion of the world-wide Milt Seebaums, he allowed his usual, carefully-controlled tones to rise to a sort of desperate, dying shriek.

“Miss...miss...I hope you are aware that we are not going to let you drive home in this condition! Miss...miss...I want you to relinquish your keys to me, and I will attempt to get us back home tonight. Miss! Sabrina!”

Sabrina was as oblivious to him as if he had been transported in from some strange dream. She began to dance: erotic bucking of the hips, posturing of a veteran go-go juggler. She must have been listening to her own, internal, sacred music.

She suddenly raised her little gun, and fired into the air. Milt Seebaum looked, suddenly, as if his bladder might pop. He gasped, backed toward the car slowly. Tanner backed with him, turned his head wearily, worriedly, and stated flatly:

“I wouldn’t say anything about it, sir. She’s killed two men already tonight.”

The car shot the line all the way back into town, but at least the lights of the city gave a kind of reassurance to the whole scene: it was possible that this whole, macabre night might, finally, come to an end.

Milt Seebaum looked as if he might weep. Pressed up next to him, her not inconsiderable breasts pressing against his stomach, Patricia was leaning in a sort of half-crouched mode.

“Milt...milt...”

Child-like voice. Paranoia.

He tried to ignore her. He looked stolidly ahead, certain that he was being punished for his indiscretion. This was God, that was it. The Milts of the world were expected to remain within a certain parameter of expected, acceptable behavior. Anything more was flagrant violation of holy writ.

And so, he would die. He was comfortable with this. After all, what did life amount to, after one had attained a certain state of being, of mental harmony, and had published all the papers that one was capable of writing in one's chosen field of academic endeavor? So. Fate was unkind; cruel, unfair. It had been good to him for many decades.

Sooner or later, everybody laid down the final, losing hand. Game over.

"Milt..."

Imploring. Needy. Childish bitch, he could have batted her on top of her sandy brown hair. Instead:

"For God's sake, Patricia, what?"

"Do you like me?"

"Yes. I like you."

Sabrina looked in the rear-view mirror.

"Hey Milty, old boy...you aren't being mean to my new friend are you?"

Sabrina said these words as if she was dragging the syllables through cotton candy and black dialect. Tanner simply stared, aghast, out the passenger side window, remembering what the fat man looked like as he had grasped, in his death agonies, the refrigerator door handle. He wondered, again, what prison life was like.

"Where are we going, Sabrina?"

Tanner's voice had a slight tremulous quality to it, mixed with the sort of caution that one takes with a very powerfully built, mentally challenged adult who was prone to violent, misguided upset.

"To my favorite bar Tanner. It's Saturday night, buddy,

we're gonna live it up. 'Tanner is the strangest name. Who named you?"

"What...what's your favorite bar?"

"Beowulf's. You didn't answer my question."

"I'm not sure."

"Hm, that's not the right answer, baby. You better give me the right answer, or, you know...pow!"

She said the last word with mocking relish, quieter and quieter, finally just moving her lips and giggling.

From the backseat, another spasm of Patricia Ireland laughter. Milt wondered if he might be able to reach up and over and secure the pistol, left lazily, precariously, in the lap of the driver. Then he thought better of it. He would wait; they would go to the bar, and he would call the police. If he made a move now, even if he didn't get shot, she might wreck. Kill them all anyway (and she seemed to be trying damn hard to have an accident as it was.) No. Discretion was the better part of valor.

Bruce McGonagill was seated on a plush white couch at the edge of the stage. On his lap, a lusty young woman gyrated acrobatically, making sure to excite him with the prospect of exploring her talents further in more subdued, private quarters.

"Oh yeah...oh mamma, lemme feel them tits."

(Touching of the performer, for all of those unacquainted with proper strip-club etiquette, is expressly forbidden. Although it is okay, theoretically, during the course of a lap dance, for certain acts that would otherwise be deemed inappropriate contact to transpire. Such as grabbing the twin globes of flesh sitting on your lap. Or, having the oftentimes surgically-augmented mammary glands of said dancer thrust into your face, and across your cheeks. And, of course, the grinding of crotches is what the entire act is all about.)

Bruce had a tremendous, massive erection brewing; a maddening tension that was impossible for him to master, and

always had been. It was going to have to be conquest. There was no other solution. It was bare instinct that drove Bruce McGonagill from one seamy situation in life to another, and he would be damned if it was going to be any different now.

Over near the bar, a trio of very large bouncers played a sort of ballerina-shuffle with an intoxicated gent who had forgot himself. Punches were thrown. Profanity was yelled. Breasts continued to jiggle and sway.

It was like Bruce McGonagill had died and gone to that great candy store in the sky.

He grunted. He sighed. He moaned. His breathing was as ragged as a ripped dishcloth. He wanted to rip the thong out from between her legs and take her in the strange, savage fashion of primal beasts in the sub-Saharan jungle. He was man. He was meat. Let him roar.

Instead, he moaned, "How much? How much baby? I know you go on dates."

She stopped her contortions for a moment, and considered. Last week she had made buku bucks going down on a heavy-set, smelly trucker that was missing teeth. That had not been fun.

But this guy was handsome. Rugged, tough, certainly an ex-con and probably free with his fists with whatever bitch dared to cross him when he was drinking. But he was also hunky. Big time hunky.

Her business sense perked up.

"It depends...what are you willing to spend, big boy?"

He didn't answer for a second, and so, as a means of convincing him she managed to straddle his face with her pelvis. He breathed in deeply. He could smell her; her sweat, her sex. It smelled like heaven. It was a perfume musk specifically calculated to drive men like Bruce McGonagill over the edge.

"Anything...anything you want baby. When?"

She smiled. She had an arrangement with the boss.

“Now, if you want. Where?”

“Not my place...”

“Oh. Old lady?”

She already knew the answer.

“She can’t do for you can she, big boy? Not the way I can.

Let’s get a hotel room.”

Jill Lavender sat in her parked car, at the edge of a darkened, dangerous lot, and watched her boyfriend emerge. On his arm, some little slut in a mini-skirt with blond hair. They got into his truck.

Son of a bitch is way too drunk to drive. Let’s see how far he gets before him and that whore get pulled over.

She had been sitting here for what seemed an interminable amount of time. It was not her idea of a happy Saturday night. And it was damn frightening, too. This particular desolate area of town had the distinction of being known as the “combat zone”. A few weeks ago, a tragic, dope addled young woman named Jane Doe had been found stabbed and left in a dumpster. Her killer had been the infamous Perpetrator Unknown.

It was getting routine for the SWAT team to be called to the nearby housing projects. How do we say it? It wasn’t anywhere near Sesame Street.

She waited until he ambled his rusted monster out of the parking lot, careful to the curb, making sure to use his turn signal.

Oh, he’s going to be extra-careful now. He’s got a hot piece of merchandise he just paid for. Bastard. I’ll kill him when I get my hands on him. I’ll literally fucking kill him. Well, here goes.

She turned the key in the ignition, and her old, battered station wagon roared to unsteady life. She had been right. He was far too preoccupied to even notice her slouched down in the driver’s seat, parked fifteen feet away from him.

Brain in his prick. Liquor for courage. No money this month.

She promised herself she would kill him. She was a woman of her word.

She slowly pulled out of the strip-club parking lot, and followed them out under the train-trestle to the rest of the wee morning hours.

They had come to a screeching halt in front of Beowulf's, which was dank, and dark, and had a combined smell of spilt beer, tobacco, pizza cheese, and unwashed hippy. It boasted a *faux* medieval décor including wall-mounted swords, shields, long drinking tables, and a fireplace. It was like a tavern set-aside for fantasy role players to drown their dateless sorrows at.

Sabrina looked at Milt in the rear-view mirror. Suddenly, she seemed to be stone cold sober, as if her buzz had been some sort of dramatic put-on. She seemed as lucid, as psychotic as Jack the Ripper must have been when he cut the uterus from his fifth victim. Her eyes were like the steely tip of a hastily drawn dagger.

"Don't get any ideas, man. If you even try to get away from us, or call the cops, or what have you, I'll kill Patricia. You got that? You can't protect her. Got that? Got that?"

"Yeah...I got that."

"Tanner, same goes for you. We're going to have fun tonight. A lot of *fun*..."

They exited the car. Patricia, apparently having dozed off under the combined weight of alcohol, sex, haunted house exploration, and much marijuana, had to be roused to waking.

"Wh-wha-wha?"

"We're going now Patricia. Get up."

"Are we home?"

"Not exactly."

Downtown. Sometime in the wee hours of Sunday morning, before last call became the grim reminder that bar-hopping had to end sometime. Four people. One of them, a highly psychotic young multiple murderess, holding each of them,

for all intents and purposes, hostage. To drink. To have “fun”.

Tanner Benjamin could not believe the luck he had been blessed with.

Part 2

Eight

What we have not made clear in the preceding narrative was a peculiar series of events that led up to the tragedy that was the cornerstone of the national headlines. What happened was terrible enough, but can anyone doubt that the fact that some one as young as little Lindsey Lavender was involved made it all the more ironic, and horrifying?

Lindsey had been sleeping peacefully, innocently; her dreams a reflection of the distortions of the day. In her dreams she was often accompanied by a friendly Dwarf she thought of affectionately as Skimmy. Skimmy was little, cute, and had a wagging dwarf beard. Skimmy could walk through walls, talk to animals, and do all sorts of things that real dwarfs obviously cannot. So let's establish the fact, from the get-go, that Skimmy is not some form of supernatural intervention.

Jill Lavender was pacing furiously downstairs, making more racket than she, apparently, had intended to. She was waiting desperately for the sitter, and the sitter was taking her time. She walked into the kitchen to noisily crash dishes around in the sink, all the better to make the unwashed dishes seem like a smaller, tidier pile.

Clutter. Crash. Bang.

Lindsey Lavender was suddenly jolted awake from a very promising dream involving a man in a blue Dalmatian suit with a

little blue Dalmatian cap, and a large, blue-spotted Dalmatian. It was a furious rip from the land of dreams, and incoming to, she realized that she now was not going to be able to go back to sleep anytime soon.

(In such moments of sheer aloneness, the imaginative faculties of children oftentimes are able to conjure certain imaginary companions to help them cope, and give them comfort. Lindsey Lavender, as we mentioned before, had just such a companion, Skimmy the Wonder Dwarf. She looked out at the darkness of her room, felt the aloneness of her young life, rolled over on one arm, and conjured Skimmy in the way that only little children and the schizophrenic are capable of.)

“Skimmy? Skimmy, are you there?”

A hunched little shape seemed to creep up from the swirling shadows of the carpet.

“Hey there Lindsey. Long time no see. Have any cookies for me?”

Lindsey frowned.

“No, Skimmy. I’m sorry. Mommy forgot to go to the store.”

Skimmy huffed, and Skimmy puffed, and Skimmy did a little angry spin and stamped one foot.

“You mean the bitch forgot our cookies again! Damn it, now I’m going to have to creep up on her and steal her breath when she sleeps.”

“No!” Lindsey hissed sharply. “She’s my mommy Skimmy. You can’t steal her breath. She...just forgets things sometimes.”

Skimmy’s face suddenly grew very grave.

“I bet I know who made her forget. It was him, wasn’t it? He did it to her. She was good mommy before she met him, wasn’t she Lindsey?”

Lindsey nodded, and then she began to weep.

“Oh, hey there Lindsey, no need to cry. We can fix him. It’s no big deal. I’ll creep up on him when he’s drunk, or stoned, or just too lazy to wake up and work. And when I do, I’ll take this

short sword here, and I'll shave off his moustache. He'd look pretty stupid without that moustache, wouldn't he Lindsey? Ha! Ha! Ha!"

And Lindsey began to laugh a little, and agreed that, in fact, Bruce would look pretty stupid without his moustache.

Skimmy bent over close to her. His breath smelled remarkably like rotten meat. Lindsey didn't like it. She wrinkled her nose and coughed, but Skimmy said, "Sorry. I just got done eating a dead cat. Tell me, Lindsey, how would you like to help me play a little trick on Mommy?"

Lindsey thought that that sounded neat. Lindsey thought that that sounded a darn sight better than just going to sleep and waking up to the same loneliness and boredom that Sunday always promised.

Skimmy said he would be right beside her all the way. Skimmy told her to get a couple of dolls and make the bed up like she was still sleeping in it. Skimmy said that when Ronnie came upstairs to check and make sure she was asleep, she would think that Lindsey was still laying there. Skimmy said he would meet her downstairs, and that she should sneak out and hide in mommy's car. Skimmy said Mommy would think that was funny.

"I'll meet you in the backseat. Remember, you have to scrunch down in the back behind mommy's seat, so she doesn't know you are there. But I'll be with you, and I'll know. Okay? See ya downstairs!"

Skimmy quickly turned, walked to the window, snapped his fingers, and disappeared in a funny little sparkle. It looked like the sort of sparkle Santa Clause might make when he was coming down the chimney.

Lindsey slowly got up, rubbed her eyes, and looked out in the gloom. More quickly, she went to the closet and began to paw through her doll collection. Bruce and another one of mommy's boyfriends had actually bought her some here and there, to try and get in good with mommy, and some of her dolls were pretty decent. She selected the one with the blondest hair, took it over to

her bed, and with the aid of a pillow and some careful organization, just managed to get everything looking right enough. Then she crept to the door, and cracked it open. She could here mommy downstairs, still rattling dishes.

She had to time this right, did Lindsey Lavender. She couldn't let mommy see her sneak out.

But she wasn't too worried.

She knew Skimmy would help things out.

The table looked like it was drowning in suicidal refuse. It was a health nut's worst nightmare: overflowing ashtrays, empty beer bottles, half an eaten pizza. Assembled were a strange mixture of friends and complete strangers. But nobody was a stranger at Beowulf's.

Drink. Drank. Drink. Drunk.

And Sabrina paid for all of it with the help of a stolen credit card. Tanner's head was bigger than a basket ball. It was amazing that his liver hadn't decided to crawl out of his body and beg for mercy. He wasn't even walking on the ground anymore. He was floating.

Patricia Ireland had managed to become surrounded by a group of older grizzled biker-types, and was busily telling them, in confab style, the details of her so-absorbing existence. Milt Seebaum had quietly turned a whiter shade of pale, and had put his head down at the long table, the sleeve of his expensive jacket soaking in a long trickle of spilt beer. Bodies came, went, sat down, got up, made unintelligible conversation and blew away like chaff in the social wind.

Every once in awhile he would poke his head up and take a massive swig of beer. He had been through three very dark, strong beers already. And he wondered, in his inebriated state, if it might not be a good idea to just get stoned later for old times sake.

Upon entering, he had stayed very close to Tanner, feeling the camaraderie in both being hostage to the whims of a gun-

toting psychopath and not, really, knowing what to do about it.

The most perplexing exchange happened when the had both taken their seats at the top of the hour. Hour? What hour, exactly it was, could not be established.

“Tanner...Tanner, what time it?”

Tanner considered. Here was the same difficulty that he had run into earlier, that he had dismissed as a result of simple shock. Now, it had reared it's ugly head between them, and demanded to be dealt with.

“I don't know Professor...my watch stopped hours ago.”

He suddenly looked very grim. Or, at least, a much greater form of grim than could have been attributed to him before the odd revelation concerning the enigmatic flow of the evening's chronology.

“So has mine apparently. I asked someone a minute ago, in the men's room. Tanner...”

He trailed off. He looked over at the bar. No clock. Amazing. How could there be no clock?

“It must just be my imagination. Maybe I'm going crazy.”

“No. No sir, you're not.”

“Tanner...Am I fucking dreaming this?”

Tanner's mouth fell open in shock. He had never heard Milt Seebaum use the F-word before.

Alcohol flowed. Tears flowed. “Flow my tears”, the policeman said, and then departed because even an off-duty cop really didn't deserve to be hanging out in a place as retro-cool as Beowulf's. It was not a prescription for promotion.

A limbless drunk was stationed at a nearly-empty corner of the table, bent over, bawling. It was Tanner Benjamin. Sabrina, who had been busily working the hanging-meat market of worthless men, all standing with their eager groins pressing tight against their faded denim jeans, spied his meager, beaten frame out of the corner of her eye. She did an abrupt about-face, and left Peter Davenport rather more than disappointed, standing like

a massive oak in the middle of the bar aisle surrounded by his buds, who must have realized the irony in having the girl he was trying to score with brush him off in favor of a weeping shorty.

Nonplussed, he tried to make it look cool. He sauntered over to the long table. He would try to put on his Mr. Goodbuddy face, the face that sometimes got the chicks. He heard the asshole Sean Patterson say “Yeah, look at him go. I’m betting on the crying guy.”

That was okay. They were both on the football team. Well, Sean just might get his ass kicked in the locker room come next practice. Just might, if he didn’t keep his mouth shut from now on.

“Hey...everything all right over here?”

He smiled. He had a big, broad smile roughly the equivalent of Richard Kiels “Jaws” character in the *James Bond* movies. He thought himself quite the dish.

It was across the bridge, closer to campus. The house was very old, and packed to maximum capacity. Music (not very good music, we might add) rumbled softly from within the walls. Several people sat out on the front porch, smoking and drinking. They were an odd assortment of young men and women. Very hip. So.

Every once in a while the front door would open, and someone would stumble out. Every once in awhile somebody or a group of somebody’s would amble up the sidewalk and stumble in. It was a continual flow of traffic in and out.

This was a band house. And that meant party house.

“Yeah...I’m fucking rock and roll.”

Biff Speedo (as he was officially dubbed that evening) sat on the couch next to Laura Larue. The small, busted coffee table in front of them was completely covered in alcohol bottles, ashtrays, food wrappers, CD covers, and what-have-yous. Around them, in an increasingly mesmerizing combination, people came

and went and stood and smoked and walked in and stood in little groups and danced in their own pathetic way. Most of these people took it for granted that the main objective in life was to be thought of as tragically, pathetically cool.

Biff had managed to poke a safety pin through the piercing in his left ear. He had drank an estimated twenty beers, and had some very cheap, disgusting wine.

“Hey, does anyone have any cough syrup?”

The skinny blond jerk came through the kitchen door, looked down at him, and then handed him a bottle of Dimetapp Elixir.

“Does this shit have codeine in it?”

“I guess.”

“Are you lying?”

“I dunno.”

The skinny blond jerk picked up his battered guitar, strummed a few chords. The living room began to empty out only slightly.

The smattering of conversations was confusing, but continually punctuated with the epithet *like*. The all-encompassing expression. The word for every occasion. The word for all times, and all crimes.

Biff Speedo opened up the Dimetapp, thought better of it, and then set it down on the coffee table where it was perched precariously next to several empty beers and a phlegm wad.

“I am, like, *so fruckin’ drunk, maaan. So fruckin...*”

“*Shut up.*”

“Hey, what the fuck was up with that little bitch at the show? Was she, like, on some kind of fucking, I dunno...was that bitch ragging?”

Laura Larue, otherwise known as Danielle, sort of rotated her prodigious posteriors to the side, and cut secret wind. Danielle Laura Larue was attractive in the way an overgrown alterna-girl teenager can be. Her hair was a fire-engine red that would have caused much surprise and consternation a decade ago.

“Fuck if I know, she just comes up to me all of a sudden and she’s like ‘your boyfriend and his band mates are a bunch of fucking dickheads’, and I’m like ‘bitch, step back before I tear you a new asshole’ and then all of a sudden she acts like she’s gonna make a move and then I’m on her. Bitch better recognize.”

She laughed, took a drink of beer, belched, and put her not inconsiderably meaty thigh on Biff Speedo’s skinny leg. She was sitting on

him, *oh god*, tonight might be the night.

The skinny blond jerk said, “I hate when that sort of thing happens when we play. It’s a real distraction.” He bent down and examined his guitar. He was the serious one. Several people walked in, said, in various ways, ‘you guys fucking rocked the house tonight man’, slapped some hands, and took various positions.

“It sucks the turnout wasn’t any bigger. But...we did okay. Well, ‘cept for Joey.”

“Aw, that shit’s not even gonna fly...” Said Joey.

Joey was a very small, exceptionally bucktoothed young man that had quit college to become a successful drummer in a campus bar band. He perpetually carried the same ignorant grin when under the influence of some mind-altering substance, and sulked and said nothing when not.

“Hey. Do you guys get into *Saturn in Retrograde*?”

The skinny blond jerk looked up.

“If you mean that corporate sellout band, hell no.”

There was a thin, pale young flower of maidenhood standing before him. Her regulation bobbed black hair was perfect. Her slender hips looked as delectable as any had seen that night, at the bar or otherwise. Smoke wafted around her pretty form, making a sort of decorative frame. Her tee shirt read: CORPORATE ROCK STILL SUCKS.

Easy mark.

“Hey, I kind of like them, okay. I’m just like a real asshole when I get done with a gig.”

“You’re a real asshole all the time, Lance.”

“Shut up”

Someone said very loudly, “I was swinging the mother fucker like this, and he was screaming, and then I let him go.” This was followed by a very unsteady demonstration of said swinging.

A Puerto Rican national exchange student *cum* bass player plugged a bizarre video game into the cheap-looking television. It alternated flashing colors. A marijuana pipe was produced and passed amongst those willing and eager. It was Saturday night.

The young maiden took a regulation hit, coughed, and wandered out of the room. Biff Speedo turned to his band mate and said, his voice dragging like rubber, “doesn’t she know who we are?”

The pot took effect quite quickly. All of a sudden, the skinny blond jerk felt himself relax. Get into the groove of the moment. Let his mind wander. During these moments, it seemed like magic lights exploded behind his eyes, and he had visions of himself and his band doing their thing. Letting loose. In empty bars across America. In the darkened, dank, density of booze-infused moments, when sweat and coolness and a desire to stay eighteen and poor forever was all that mattered in life. Righteous ones.

He was, however, thirty years old.

A small skinny woman with a hook nose walked in and said, “I just saw Crazy walking down the sidewalk. Apparently he’s dropping by.”

The woman was a university prof. She doubled as the lead singer of *Poison Betty*. At night, sometimes, she crocheted.

“Well I didn’t fucking invite him.”

Sounds seemed warped, warbly, like everything was dragging by at half-speed.

Crazy was the mutually agreed upon moniker of one Kevin Hickman, a veritable vegetable who had refused to quit talking. When under the effect of one of two various psycho-affective

medications, he seemed, for a short period, to be somewhat lucid. But, somehow, always touched in a way that any “normal” person could glean after merely seven hours of acquaintance.

He was also a physical mutant; no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t be out of shape. Have you ever in your life met someone like that? Who was naturally gifted with the physique of a bantam-weight boxer?

Kev had had problems his entire life. To begin with, it had started when he was twelve and had sniffed glue with his favorite cousin Ernie. That had been the beginning of a long painful road: special classes, rehab, institutions. Sniffing glue can have a lasting, permanent impact, it would seem, on the psychological faculties of the sniffer. It had had such an impact on Kev.

But he was handsome, in his own way. He managed to get more pussy than a toilet seat, and much of it for a single night. One particular young lady had liked him very well for a time a time and two times, until he told her about the way the television talked to him. The things that it said. What it commanded him to do.

It had been almost a year since he had last set eyes on Tanner Benjamin. No, actually that’s not quite true. Maybe it had only been several months. At any rate, the last time had been real eventful. In fact, it had been in this very house.

He had busily stolen the same girl that Tanner had been chasing for a month. It had been easy, what with his mutant physique and his lack of social graces, he was a born lothario. Tanner had managed to take the whole situation in stride; he knew he didn’t want to have to fight Kev. He didn’t have any medical coverage.

It had been a night of not inconsiderable alcoholic intake, and Tanner and Kev had hit the town in the loose-cannon fashion of “aw shucks big brother” that Tanner was so used to by now. They had seen a show, the same band that they had seen fifteen other times, and then they had gone back to the *Saturn in Retrograde* house to party with everyone.

It had amounted to Kev stealing Tanner's girl that night. Tanner's girl was an exceptionally cold-hearted attractive young woman with not an ounce of caring whether or not she ripped out Tanner's beady little heart and stepped on it under the heel of one regulation Doc Marten boot. In that respect, she was fairly typical.

Tanner had drank himself into the proverbial stupor, had wandered around the house, much of it cleared out by this point, and had finally been whisked away in the piece-of-shit car owned by Kev back to Kev's place. With the girl. It was all a part of the ritualistic torture of Tanner Benjamin.

The place was a monumentally ancient, decrepit structure that seemed to be beyond the human capability of comprehension. It had roughly the architectural layout of the infamous Winchester Mystery House in California. It had been busted down into student apartments.

Kev, at this time, was attempting to identify himself as a student.

Somewhere, in the drunken vicinity of the brain of Tanner Benjamin, it had not been conveniently put together that this was, in fact, a house of separate apartments. But he thought that, in fact, it was simply *one* house. Tanner followed the budding young couple through the battered side door in one of the many odd abutments of the structure, and fell into a kind of ultra-dismal mental vegetation.

Goodbyes were quickly said, and the two trudged up the immense staircase, disappearing into a the maze-like structure of the upper floors. There was little doubt about what was going to occur in those passionate morning hours.

For Tanner, though, there was the comfortable downstairs area, which was wide and vacant and dim in the wee hours of the morning. He felt his buzz become sluggish. He wanted another beer.

The windows were long in the way that windows were over a hundred years ago. The place must have, in it's hey day, been a manse for some wealthy family. Tanner, not realizing that the

present state of dilapidation suggested not that it was a single residence, but a plethora of residences, wondered, exactly, how in the hell Kev managed to afford it.

(It will be noted for posterity that Tanner Benjamin had only known of the existence of Kev a fortnight hence, and so, in consideration of this fact, he can be forgiven for being ignorant of the details of so many of the facets of the so-charming man's existence)

He wandered into the kitchen, which was long and unhygienic looking, and very bright due to the fluorescents. He suddenly had the first few stirrings of uneasiness as he padded about, looking in the various empty cabinets.

Tanner had just read the novel *American Psycho* by the writer Brett Easton Ellis. The novel portrays a very rich young Wall Street investment broker with the odd habit of relentlessly and brutally killing his dates. Tanner, in his own powerfully drunken way, was beginning to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

Kev seemed to have money, always. Maybe rich parents. He had this big, creepy house. An inheritance? He was always with young women. Well, he was attractive and charming in a strange, repulsive way.

Then, they were never seen with him again...

Tanner spun around, looked at the refrigerator, and walked toward it slowly. His arm started to quiver. He put out his arm slowly, envisioning the brutal carnage that must, surely, lay inside.

Heads wrapped in plastic baggies. Severed limbs. Real Jeffrey Dahmer-style kiddy munchies. He put his drunken finger tips on the handle, too scared for a moment to do anything but stand there and stare.

What if, all of a sudden, she started screaming from upstairs? What would I do? Would I run upstairs and try to be Mr. Superhero He-Man, and save her, even though, potentially, he might have a weapon, maybe even a chainsaw or a meat cleaver? Would I risk becoming another statistic, another strange, young form found floating in a river or buried in a shallow grave in

some rural area?

He could well-imagine Crazy Kev coming downstairs, blood soaked, naked, with a look of sheer, demonic fury on his boyish face, and pouncing on him like a young panther in heat.

He was in the belly of the beast.

He suddenly sucked in his fear, and in one bold swoop he opened the door.

His heart skipped a beat.

There was only one beer left.

Nine

But that had been months ago, and Kev hadn't expected to run into Tanner tonight. That had been a bad scene. Real bad. He had to get out of Beowulf's, cross the bridge, and get over to campus, where folks were still decent.

He had a few toughs with hearts of gold that were ready to pound him flat, after the shit he pulled tonight. And he did, in his own way, generally feel bad. He liked Tanner, even though Tanner was, essentially, a little girl in a twenty-five year old body. But if the guy wanted to hang out with big boys, he had to learn tough, right?

He had walked into Beowulf's after smoking crack, and he had been drinking some, too. And he had had some pills. He was trashed, and he wanted to be more trashed.

He had seen him curled like a little baby in a puddle of spilt beer at the farthest table. And damn, he was with the hottest female that Kev had laid eyes on in quite some time.

"Hey Tanner, what the fucks up man?"

Tanner looked up at him blearily. He looked like he had been dragged over five miles of rough road. Kev backed away, mumbled something, and then proceeded to initiate brainwashing on the very hot young lass that seemed to be hovering in circles around Tanner.

"Hey, weren't you in my freshman comp class? It was with

Rudolf?”

He sized her up quickly, decided that boyish and stupid would be the best way to operate. Sabrina looked at him, nonplussed, and then said, “Hey, I don’t think so. I know you do look familiar though.”

“Maybe it was at one of my karate tournaments. Do you get into karate? I have two black belts.”

“No.”

“Well, thing is when I lived with my dad out in Cali, I use to run around with this guy that was in the Eight Ball Posse, and he shot this guy who was in a rival gang, and you know it was kind of a like a guilt with association type thing. So I started learning some moves, and I got good enough at it to start competing. But then I got all fucked up. Coke. I had to split. Came here. Now I’m clean. Except for when I smoke grass.”

This was the one that always worked. He started talking faster, building the intense magnification of his personal charisma to that fine, white-hot point that always reeled them in and left them begging for more. Well, the dumb ones, at any rate.

Sabrina turned on her heel, and considered the options laid out before her. To one side Kev, to the other Peter Davenport (who had leaned quite far into the bar now, was sighing, and looking up and down the length at whoever and whatever seemed to have attached itself to a stool and a mug), and, below and slightly to the left, a very drunk, remorseful Tanner.

Milt Seebaum became that rarity at Beowulf’s: the righteously, shit-faced academic. He swayed, nearly colliding into a few other patrons, into the filthy, foul-smelling cubby marked *men*.

Unfortunately, a four hundred pound biker was busily occupying the only existent stall. His copious bowel eruptions only added a seasoning of repulsion to the entire effect, and suddenly Milt bowed before a piss stinking porcelain urinal and erupted into a veritable geyser of gushing red and black streaked

beer vomit.

“Ya doin’ all right, buddy row?”

The four hundred pound biker asked, erupting once again into a gastric raspberry, and Milt felt what was left of his sanity and self respect come up with his lunch, dinner, and four glasses of Stout.

He was crawling now. There was a half-inch of scum on the floor, certainly a mixture of mud, dust, boot grease, urine, and saliva. It slimed the palms of his hands with it’s miasmal grit, and as he held his head up like a wagging dog, he realized that the lavatory, though it had been spinning before, was doing less so now.

Driblets of puke streamed from the corners of his lips, and one nostril.

Undignified, damn undignified, was all that he could think.

Patricia Ireland had not vomited, but her tolerance to inebriates was much higher. In fact, she had spent the ensuing hours getting rather busily acquainted with several free-floating groups of people. She had managed to convey, to all of them, the epic saga of her life story, in fleeting bursts and to quickly turning backs.

“And so, you know how it is, I was alone, and so I decided that I would...oh, he’s rude.”

“Yeah he’s like that. What did you say your name was?”

“Patricia. So anyway, like I was saying, I decided that I just couldn’t deal with all the Betsy Homemaker shit, and so I told Dan that he could take his offer, and ya know, shuv it, and I decided that I wanted to go after my Masters, and so...”

Various surly, unimpressed men had already decided, based on the two red fully-blown pupils that exposed themselves during this confessional that (a) Patricia had been smoking a lot of grass, (b) She was probably more annoying straight than stoned, and, consequently, not much worth the hassle unless you were really desperate.

Tanner, suddenly, had let loose. He began to bawl in the inimitable Tanner fashion, his head cradled into the crook of his arm. He sobbed in loud, guffawing gasps, and heads popped up and turned.

Kev was suddenly very disgusted.

He grabbed Tanner by the sleeve of his little leather jacket.

“Tanner!...what the fuck is wrong with you? What the fuck is wrong with you, man?”

He began to jerk Tanner around like a ragged doll. Several people popped up with, “he’s drunk man leave him alone.”

He pulled Tanner out his seat. Sabrina jumped into action. She began to pound Kev on the side of one meaty arm, and grabbed the other sleeve of Tanner’s jacket. Now they were involved in a taffy-pull. It was ludicrous at best.

A row of beer glasses toppled across the bar, soaking various laps. Muttered cries of profanity and disgust erupted from bearded and fuzzy lips. Peter Davenport thought it was hilarious, to say the least, but thought that he would add, “aw hey man, don’t do that to the guy man. C’mon, he’s a little guy man.” He lifted not a finger to help. He no longer really considered spending the evening with the crazy bitch to be in the realm of real possibilities.

“Let him go, mother fucker!”

“Nah, I’m taking this son of a bitch outside and teaching him a lesson! You’ll like him better, afterwards. I promise.”

Tanner began to laugh. Really, really laugh.

Suddenly, a four hundred pound biker stepped up behind Kev and politely told him that, if he didn’t stop what he was trying to do, the four hundred pound biker would make sure that Kev couldn’t have children anymore. Tanner was hastily let go, Kev turned around, began to apologize, to the biker, to people with wet beer lap, and finally to Sabrina. Tanner, by the force of backward projection, started to twist out of Sabrina’s grasp. But they managed to find him some stability, and he made it to his feet.

A bartender walked up to Kev, got very close to his face, and told him he was kicked out on a semi-permanent basis.

That had been half an hour or so ago. Maybe.

He walked up onto the porch, finally able to see, in the damp light coming from the door, a few faces seated around on the ledge outside, smoking cigarettes and hefting bottles.

“Party here tonight?” He tried to sound hopeful.

Nobody answered him.

He quickly opened and shut the screen door, walked inside to find Lance from *Saturn in Retrograde*. The living room was trashed, but the living room was always trashed. Biff Speedo and his girlfriend had passed out on each other.

“Where’s Lance? Hey”.

No reply.

He walked into the kitchen. It was typically dirty.

Where was everybody?

Didn’t they realize he would be over?

She had never tailed anyone in her life, but she realized she had a special aptitude for it that night.

He was damn drunk though, much too drunk to be behind the wheel. He was shooting the line, weaving in and out, and barely stopping at signs and lights. He started suspecting, she knew, that she might be a cop.

She could picture him, his gradual sense of unease mounting. DUI was too stupid an offense for him to tolerate getting pulled over for, especially since he had a hot piece of ass he had just paid to lay. She wondered how long it would take him to realize that it was his “old lady’s” car.

He began to take odd turns, go down roads she wasn’t familiar with. Where was he going?

“I think we got a pig on our ass, baby. I’m gonna try to lose him”.

He veered wildly, letting the steering wheel run smooth through his fingers. He knew what he was doing, He used to be a stock car driver.

“Hey baby, did you know I use to be a stock car driver?”

“No.”

She answered demurely. She was a little nervous now. She couldn’t afford to get busted again. She didn’t like jail much. She could never find anywhere to apply her makeup.

He sailed through neighborhoods, down avenues, past playgrounds, through backyards, and over small critters. But she had a bead on him. She would hang his balls around his neck tonight, or she would die trying.

In the backseat, crouched low and shivering with cold and fright, her ten year old daughter tried hard to maintain conversational telepathic tones with the ever-enigmatic Skimmy.

Boom. Rattle. Clatter.

Skree!

Now, it was almost a chase. Now she could feel her blood pressure rise. It was well past midnight. It was the hour of the wolf.

“Oh shit. That’s no cop, baby. Know who that is?”

She breathed, inwardly, an intense sigh of relief.

“Who?”

He smiled.

“It’s my fucking sister, man.”

“We’re getting the fuck out of here. C’mon”

Milt Seebaum stumbled from the men’s room. His head was a massive, pounding industrial press of pain, but at least he could circumnavigate through the tiny dotted crowd.

“Sabrina...are we leaving?”

“Yes. Get Patricia.”

“I think I’d rather you just left us here, if you don’t mind.”

She considered.

“No. No, you’re coming too. And you don’t dare say no to me, Milt. Believe me. Now.”

Seebaum managed, with much difficulty, to move back over to the side of the bar closest to the empty stage. Pat Ireland was sitting by her lonesome, oblivious to all and everything, apparently enjoying some vague recollection or thought that only held any relevance for her.

“Pat. Sabrina says we have to leave. They tried to kill Tanner. I think I’m going to die from alcohol poisoning.”

She looked up for a moment, uncomprehending. Then stated, as if she had just woken up from a long, dreamful sleep, “What? Oh, we’re going?”

They made their way back across the bar, and altogether walked out the ancient, rickety door.

A few huffs of appraisal and indignation were spat at them as they exited.

Gary knelt low, wiping the face of the sink and the dishwasher in utter, numbed exhaustion. He had eaten nothing the entire day. He hadn’t had time to take a break.

They had just closed the grill. The thoroughly-tattooed lummo had taken his apron off, wiped sweat from his forehead, thrown his spatula down, and said, “Man, I am going to go home and smoke an entire eighth.”

“I feel that shit.”

“Hey, before we do this shit, you wanna smoke a joint with me Gary? You know we deserve it, my man.”

Gary’s head shot up and he half-turned and looked at him. Under normal circumstances it would not have happened. But tonight had been anything but normal. He said, “Sure.”

“Cool”. He drew the word out and did a little half-nod. He

went downstairs to get his coat.

They walked out the side door, Gary still wearing his apron, walked across the street past the upstairs tattoo parlor and hot dog stand, and in back of the campus coffee shop. It was catty corner to a popular bar with a fenced-in patio area. Someone whistled at them from behind the fence. There had to be eighty seven people crammed back there.

“Hey, I bet I have a bigger dick than your boyfriend.”

There was a slight pause, and a female voice said, half-mockingly, “betcha don’t”.

“You wanna find out?” Keith turned back to Gary, spat, said, “stupid bitch.” They got into Keith’s car.

Keith produced one very skinny little joint. It was of the variety commonly referred to as a “pinner”.

“Its weak, dude. But it’ll do in a pinch. Man, it was fucking busy tonight.”

“Yeah. And lucky me fucking Tanner decides to take the fucking night off.”

Keith lit the joint, took a hit, and raspily intoned, “You want me to kill him?”

He passed it.

They both broke into laughter.

“No. I’m saving him for myself. When that little shit comes into get his last check, I’m gonna make him blow me for it.”

“Damn.”

More laughter. Another toke. Keith turned on some god awful heavy alternative rock.

“I love these guys. I party with them. They’re called---”

But he was cut short. A campus cop car came up the alley, creeping, looking for just such a situation as they had put themselves in.

“Oh shit.”

There was a very tense moment when they wondered, maddeningly, if the car was going to come to a slow halt in the middle of the alley, and the cop was going to emerge and ask

them exactly what they were both doing sitting in a parked car smoking a very tiny, weak joint.

Ten

At roughly the same moment, a BMW sports model that had been obtained for the young driver out of the good graces of his father's not inconsiderable wealth slicked it's way down the battered street like a predator. Behind the wheel and in the passenger seat, two young men brooded on what was to transpire during the rest of the night.

"Here, listen to this."

The volume of the CD player was cranked to earsplitting level. The car began to vibrate with the fury of the music of a popular death metal band. The lyrics (which were barely discernible) were a glorification of sadism and murder.

"It's cool. I saw them last summer at Ozzfest. I couldn't fucking believe it. The singer asked everyone in the audience to spit on him...so here I am, up front, and I see these security people just start to back out of the way. And I didn't know what was coming---"

"Ah hah. You got fucking covered in goober didn't you?"

"It was fucking disgusting. He just rolled around in it naked. I couldn't fucking believe it."

The music pounded and droned. There was an uncomfortable silence for a few seconds. They could both feel the tension in the car mount.

The driver turned down a dizzying succession of different side streets. Already they had driven, quickly and erratically, through the country. The driver, Kyle, could feel his temples pound. He didn't know if he wanted to go through with this shit or not. It all seemed too final, somehow. After you committed an act like they were going to commit in the next, approximately, sixty minutes where was there left to go?

“Do you think we’ll make the news?”

“Big time. They will never forget this shit. It will go down in history.”

The driver sighed. He could feel the shakiness in his arms, the hollow feeling of fear and hatred that nestled in his skinny chest. He would be leaving some things behind: his girlfriend, for starters. But it didn’t matter. This was the world as it would be. You could only stave off the inevitable for so long.

“Darren...do you really want to go through with this shit? Tonight?”

The young man in the passenger seat looked out the window at the darkened storefronts that whisked by. In 19 years of living it had built up: the hatred, the confusion, the torment. He didn’t really think of anything as being real anymore, not in the sense that there was something, some future he could look to, and be certain of. It all seemed so senseless, so lacking in any meaning.

College. He didn’t want to go to college. Work? He didn’t want to do that either. He didn’t have any options left. The world had failed him. It ceased to amuse.

“Yeah. We have to do it tonight, Kyle. You fucking know that. It’s tonight, or never.”

The driver turned again, sharply. He drove into the kind of upscale housing edition where he had been raised. He looked out across darkened lawns, at two car garages, three hundred thousand dollar homes, and what must be whatever was left of the typical American family, sleeping inside.

He could see Buddy and Junior in their respective rooms. Mom upstairs in curlers, unable to sleep without the aid of valium. Dad would be in the den, watching a DVD on the massive color television set. It was all so empty it made him want to shake.

“Yeah...fuck it. Let’s do it. There’s no reason to become a part of this. This is what killed the world. This is what they wanted us to become when we graduated. How could they be so

fucking...empty? So lifeless. So dead..."

He began to mouth the words blasting out of the car speakers. He found it gave him courage. In the trunk, they had two semi-automatic machine guns and enough ammo to take out the population of a small island nation.

It was going to be a tough Sunday morning.

They started off by pulling out in the country and toking up. That was going to make it a lot easier, a lot more painful. Kyle and Darren laid out on the hood of the car for a moment, staring out at the stars.

"You believe in astrology, Dare?"

"No."

"Neither do I...I was told once, by a girl I went out with whose mom was all into the shit, that I was born under a 'dark star'. A Bad sign, or some shit. I'm a Sagittarius. That's all I know. I don't even know what the fuck it means."

"I'm a Capricorn... Capricorn's ruled by Saturn."

Kyle turned slightly and looked at his friend.

"How in the fuck did you know that?"

"I didn't. It's just a line from some old movie I saw once... Oh, yeah, it's from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*."

"No it isn't."

"Bullshit. I know what I'm talking about. You just don't remember."

He sat up, looked down at Kyle, and said, "okay, remember the scene where they were in the van, and she's got an astrology magazine, and she's talking to the last girl, you know the last girl to get killed?"

Pause.

"Yeah."

"Well, she tells her that Capricorn is ruled by Saturn... that Saturn is malefic. Remember how they had all that solar flare shit right at the beginning? Before it shows the first corpse, and it's kind of tied up on this post and shit."

Kyle sat up. He pretended he was overly interested in the topic.

“Yeah, oh yeah. Now I remember.”

Darren Rawlings spit, reached in his pack for a cigarette, and lit it with trembling hands. He sucked in the smoke like it was all that stood between him and certain, instantaneous death.

The country creaked and groaned. They were farther out than they wanted to be, and to get done what they had to do tonight, they would need to get going shortly.

Suddenly, Darren didn't want to anymore. Not at all. Now, he simply wanted to go home and sit in front of his computer. It had seemed, for the past month that they had been planning this, like it was all just another game. He had joyously taken part in the germinating of the idea, in the plotting, in the fantasy aspects of the whole thing. But now the day was here, a date picked arbitrarily from the calendar. A date that everything ended.

“I'm gonna miss movies the most man. I love the movies.”

“My favorite movie is *Taxi Driver*.”

“I like *The Dirty Dozen*, *Death Wish*, *Halloween*, *Scarface*...”

Kyle suddenly broke into a very bad Al Pacino impersonation.

“Say hello to my little friend! Bap bap bap bap bap!”

He began to shoot imaginary mafia hit men lurking in the woods.

A few moments later, Kyle rolled off the hood of the car, and Darren, slowly, drudgingly, followed. The two young men went to the trunk of the car, pulled it open, and revealed the two AK 47-style assault weapons.

Kyle's ears pounded. His chest heaved. He had the most massive, nervous erection he had ever experienced in the course of his life.

It was time.

They got in the car. Here was resolution. Here was finality. They pulled out of the dirt road that looked out over a dismal, overgrown pond, executed a haphazard roundabout, and found there way back out onto eighteen. Headed back to town. Headed toward destiny.

They were no longer losers, in their mind. Now, their names would be written in horrific, cheap, tabloid ink for all time. They would be consigned, even in death, upon the archives of crime history forevermore. Between the pages of bad books. On the covers of garish, too brightly printed magazines. Over and over they would be the stuff of nightmares, ejaculating their naked truth into the world in a way that had made Manson, and Bundy, and Dahmer household names.

And all Darren Rawlings could think about was, *this is the American Dream...this is the American Dream...this is the American Dream...*

Eleven

The cop had not stopped.

“Goddamn that was close. Man, that was really fucking scary.”

The joint had been lifted back up, tensely, and toked a few more times.

“Okay, now...we have shit to do. Keith, my man...this has been *good*.”

Gary slapped his hand. Keith’s hand was an immensely gnarled, knotted piece of flesh that was, also, heavily tattooed. He rolled the window down slowly, letting the pot smoke drift out. People nearby would smell the heavy funk of it, and know what had just taken place. But not the cop, thought Gary, and that is *good too*. He found the word good was a hundred miles high and a football field long in his mind. He began to giggle. He was stoned.

“Okay, Gare, let’s do it. I’ll get the matts if you just worry

about the dishes. We'll bust the bitch down in no time."

They got out of the car, slammed the doors, and started to walk across the parking lot. Around them, standing on balconies overlooking the lot, richer than thou girls and their paramours yelled a few loud, half-hearted inanities and whoops to the drunken still-dark morning. Music--- loud, pumping, strummed, blasted, and or otherwise---seemed to be coming in from all different directions. The sidewalks were still teeming with floating university fodder.

"It ain't church time yet, is it Gare? Hour of the wolf."

Gary shot his head back suddenly, and did a werewolf howl. Laughter and Keith Decker followed him into the side door of Delcino's. Back to the kitchen that still had to be cleaned.

Suddenly, Gary's buzz disappeared completely. There was something wrong. He could just feel it in the air.

Out in the bar, a dull roar of voices still partied, still drank, still enjoyed being young. The bartender, Sykes, was popular, quick, and good looking. The waitresses had all either split, or were out in the crowd at a table, working off the stress of the evening. Nothing was wrong. This was the way it had been ever since he started here, and he had been working here for four years.

Yet, something *was* wrong. Or, was going to be. He could feel his chest start to heave.

"Y-you all right, buddy?"

Keith Decker was busily folding a towel around his hand, getting ready to clean the grill.

"Yeah...I, just, all of a sudden..."

He grabbed his chest.

"Dude...it's just the bud man. It's stronger than what I said. Shit just hit you hard. Why don't you sit down for a minute?"

Keith actually looked very perturbed for a minute, as if to say, *don't you dare fucking freak out on me and have to go to the hospital or some shit, man.*

"No, no, I'll be fine. C'mon. We gotta get this shit done."

Gary started to pick up dishes and load them in the washer. He moved as quickly, under the circumstances, as it was possible for him to do. Still, he couldn't shake the menacing vibe of evil that had steeled over him. He felt like he might keel over in fright.

Sabrina, Tanner, Milt, and Patricia all went like some sort of mad posse out the front door, down the alley, and all of sudden, realized they were actually headed in the wrong direction. They had parked across the street.

"W-what the fuck are we doing? We didn't park in the back lot."

Sabrina pivoted like a top and the rest stumblingly followed. Before they could take another step, they were met by two men who had just walked into Beowulf's, seen that whoever they were supposed to meet was, in fact, not there, and left.

The two were very large, had clean-shaven heads, and were wearing barely readable tee-shirts covered in gothic lettering. One of them had been the man that had sucker-punched Tanner the night before.

"Well, well, well...it's, what's your name?"

The two men were standing directly in front of them. They seemed to take a position of barring any passing.

"Hey man, we're just trying to go home."

"If I wanted any shit from you, I'd squeeze your head."

The man that had sucker-punched Tanner at the *Saturn in Retrograde* party the night before strolled up to them casually. They must have been a pretty sight. His friend hovered to the side. He figured they could finish up Tanner right in front of his stupid friends, and probably make off with the hot girl he was with. Then they could take turns fucking her all morning. She would like that.

"Hey honey, why are you with these jerks? Why don't you try a real man?"

"C'mon guys we just want to go home..."

Suddenly, before Tanner even realized what had happened, blood flew up, spattering them. The bully looked down at a long, beautiful hand holding a smoking gun to his belly. He suddenly yelled, keeled over, and nearly fell in a crouched, fetal position.

There was blood oozing out of his teeth. He looked with rabid eyes up at the little group. Stunned, almost more angry than anything, he kept saying, "You bitch...you fucking bitch...you shot me. You shot me. I can't believe you fucking shot me."

Sabrina looked over at his friend. The man completely lost nerve, jittered in place for a moment, as if his legs didn't know what to do with themselves, and then said, "I-I'm sorry, I'm really fucking sorry man."

He booked.

The bully was still crouched low in front of them, on one knee. Suddenly, he looked at them, his face imploring.

"C-could you please call an ambulance? Please. Could you call an ambulance?"

Sabrina spit, "Call one yourself."

He fell flat. He was bleeding profusely. The four of them stood there a moment. He was dying. The shock was so numbing, it was anti-climactic.

Tanner suddenly realized something.

There had been no report. No sound from the gun.

It had been a completely *silent* shooting.

"What the *fuck* did you do, Sabrina?"

Tanner said it slowly, as if he couldn't quite put it all together.

"It's easy...she just killed a man."

Pat Ireland suddenly crumpled against Milt's chest, breathlessly weeping.

"Ohmigod, Milt...why'd she do that? I can't believe it she just killed him in cold blood oh my god Milt how could anyone..."

And on and on.

"It was easy for her Pat. She's a monster. We're her

prisoners. Isn't that right, Tanner? Haven't you realize that yet? No. You were too stoned to take tonight seriously."

Sabrina stepped away from them and turned suddenly saying, "We have got to get the fuck out of here, folks. Now. Before somebody comes out here and sees this shit."

Suddenly, something exploded in Tanner's head. An idea. A vision. He knew what to do now. It was as clear as day.

In one quick move he lowered his body, and like a charging bull drove his tough little skull directly into Sabrina's gut. He was surprised at how thin, how spent she seemed. How easy it was to just bowl her over.

She fell back, sprawled across the alley, and Tanner jumped on top of her. He suddenly had the gun out of her hand. He held it out on the end of arms that felt as heavy as lead bars. Suddenly, everything began to move at a blur. Milt and Pat wanted to go inside Beowulf's and get help. Sabrina rose shakily to her feet, and looked at Tanner as if to say, *and this is how you repay me? For all the fun we've had tonight? Bastard.*

Tanner would have none of it. Now, for the first time tonight, he had the gun. He was in charge. There was a dead man laying in the alley in front of them, and any minute the place was going to be swarming with drunks, cops, curious people. He wasn't going down like that.

He commandeered them all out of the alley, and across the street as quickly as their legs could carry them. Then, making sure to keep the gun poised upon her right cheek, he told Sabrina to start driving.

"Tanner..." She said, looking at him, half-smiling. "Tanner, do you even know how to fire the mother fucker?"

"My dad was in the army. He use to take me to the rifle range all the time. Do you want to find out if I can the hard way?"

Pat Ireland was still sobbing madly, and it became even louder, more grotesque with the car doors shut.

Milt suddenly reached over in drunken fury and slapped her. Hard. Violently.

Tanner told him to fucking stop.

Sabrina smiled.

Tanner put the tip of the gun to her temple.

The car screeched away in in a squeal of burning rubber.

Minutes later, two men exited the bar, turned down the alley and discovered the man that Sabrina had shot. He was laying on his stomach.

In the darkness, it was impossible for two drunks to see a pool of slick blood under a man.

“Ha! He fucking passed out here. Boy, is he gonna be in for a surprise when he wakes up tomorrow.”

They both continued walking, past the back parking lot, through the fast-decaying neighborhoods that had once known opulence. On the way back to their mutual home, they talked about Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Twelve

Mary Lee pulled on her panties, her favorite skirt, adjusted her make-up, and chatted on her cell phone simultaneously.

“Well, what did he say exactly? Yeah? Yeah. Like, how did he put it? Like, did he seem like he would be interested? Or what. Yeah. Yeah. I’ll be there. I’ll meet you outside. Like, ten minutes. Oh dude, I hope he shows up. Yeah! He’s like a fucking fox, Beth. Okay. Okay Love you too. Okay. See ya. Okay. Okay. Ten minutes. Stat.”

She fluffed her hair. She sprayed some hairspray. She was going down to the University Village, to Delcino’s, to lay claim on a boy. He would be there, living up Saturday night with his friends. He was too much. He was a fucking fox.

She hadn’t, really planned on going out tonight. Men were such pigs, and all they ever thought about was one thing.

She didn't have a problem giving it to someone that was worthy. But so few of them actually excited her. It was the repetition of their one demand that was so infuriating. It was like the single track of a steel-trap mind. It was hard-wired into them, and everything else was just part of the disguise.

She looked at herself in the full length mirror. She was a bold creature, a looker, and she knew she could take her pick. It hadn't always been like that. Once, she had been fat, frumpy, and unloved. Then she had wised up. She had started skipping meals, then starving herself for days at a time.

She did jumping jacks in front of the mirror, naked. She lived on Ramen noodles and green beans. She puked up sweets.

Little by little the pounds had come off. And the boys had started to take notice. In high school, and now college, she had done a complete about-face. She lost the weight, lost the shyness, and started buying fashion magazines. She maxed out a credit card on new clothes, sexy underwear, and perfume. She started visiting a tanning salon.

She wasn't going to be one of those old women who never managed to snag a hubby. She had been raised to be a breeder, a homemaker, a mother. Well, she could snag the man now, if she could only find him. There were so many fish out there, and so many of them she caught seemed only to be worthy of only a look before being tossed back out to the river. It made her, often, sigh inwardly.

There. She looked good. She looked ready. She looked like she could whip the competition hands-down. She slipped into her sexy heels, bloused the top, and pursed her lips. She grabbed her purse.

In truth, she reflected, she probably looked a little like a hooker. But, hey, whatever it took. This guy had it. He was, like, a total hunk. It was, like, going to be her night.

She opened the door of her little hatch-back, slinked inside, revved the engine, and thought for a moment. Had she forgotten anything? She started rummaging around in her purse.

Lipstick. Check. Money. Check. Mace. Check.

Condoms.

She started up the car, pulled out of the driveway, headed out to the CVS Pharmacy on Wheeling. She had time. Beth could wait. It was only ten-thirty.

In her world.

Part 3

Thirteen

She was in most respects a happy woman. Except, of course, when Leland beat her.

It was just something she had to bear, she realized. Divorce was not an option if you were the wife of a highly-respected local physician. Not if you had no way to maintain the lifestyle to which you had become accustomed.

Wasn't that the meaning behind it all, anyway? To enjoy as much of life as you could, possibly, enjoy, despite the circumstances? Her circumstances were, remarkably, descent. He didn't even get angry all that often anymore. Just sat upstairs in his study, brooding.

Her name was Anna, and she had come from a distant land to marry Doctor Durant. It had been like a page torn from a fairy book romance then. She had escaped life on a farm in miserable County Cork to come and live in America. To be looked after by servants, and to be kept like another pet in the collection of her dear, mad and maddening husband.

He was not all that handsome, she surmised one evening, looking out across the veranda, but he had handsome money. And she finally knew, after so many years of cold, intense pondering, what the meaning of her future might be. It was to be a kept lady. A pretty bird in a nice, residential cage.

At least it beat cooking breakfast for farm hands.

She had the entire house to herself. It was so dark, so quiet at night. She liked nothing better than to go out on the balcony in the dead of evening, her white chemise slip blowing lightly in the gale, and stare up at the stars. Often, Leland was gone at nights.

That was good. That was very, very good. More time to plot and ponder. More time to dream.

She supposed that one day she might be a ghost. She knew that, quite possibly, this old house with its ceilings and its wide expanse of lawn, and its lush, over-bright garden in the back, would probably outlive them. Outlive their marriage, their loves, their hopes, and would continue to hold the patterns of their existence within itself until time ceased to move into the yawning mouth of infinity. And would she still be here, out on the terrace, looking up at the stars?

What did the future hold? Already, there had been a Great War, the airplane, the automobile, the radio. Would Negroes ever have the same rights as white men? She hoped so, for God's sake. Her favorite woman in the world was their old black cook Henrietta.

Anna winced sometimes to realize the contradiction inherent in America being the "Land of the Free", and an entire class of its citizens being unable to sit at the same lunch counters as her and her husband, and all the other women like her and all the other men like her husband.

Tonight, the wind blew lightly, cooling the damp sheen of sweat that had accumulated in her lonely bed. What must it be like, she wondered, to have a man that you could count on being there when the sun went down? Jules had started to slip out more and more, with a nod and a few mumbled words, saying he was going to be "busy" this evening. She never asked him where he went. She damn well knew better.

She realized he might be having an affair. But what did it really matter? Whether he was or he wasn't, it was an option that was forbidden her, and granted him as privilege of his male station. She wanted to spit when she thought of it. She wondered

if that was something that was ever going to change either.

She pined for a lover. For comfort. For a man that was understanding, gracious, a joy to be with. It was getting cold. She pulled her robe tight around her, cast a glance down the road at the mammoth hotel erected by Mr. Rexroth, a friend of her husbands, and went back through the glass doors and into the darkness of her room.

Mr. Rexroth was one of the more distasteful individuals she had to accommodate on behalf of her husband. He was a skinny, putrid little blackguard with a perpetual cigar smoldering at the end of his liver-colored lips. But it was his moustache, a black streak that approximated a smudge of grease paint, that seemed to add the appropriate villainous cast to his character. She loathed him.

He was forever, infernally, falsely, forcedly polite. And he was a masher. She could feel his lecherous stare whenever Leland walked in the door with him in tow.

“Well, and there’s the lovely Anna Durant. My, do you get more lovelier every time I look at you?”

And then he would take her hand, bow, and plant a little kiss on the knuckles. It made her want to be ill.

“C’mon, Rexroth, let’s go into the study and go over some of those accounts. I think something needs to be settled.”

And the two of them would trudge upstairs, and slam the study door, and be there until late, drinking gin and smoking a veritable bumper crop of expensive cigars.

She was left to putter in the garden, or sit with ice tea and a good book.

She walked over to her bed and slipped off the robe. She slowly slipped beneath the covers, wondering, not for the first time, if there was anything more to life. Then she closed her eyes. For the last time.

He had carefully dipped the entire body in nitric acid. It left

a sort of pink sludge behind, a noxious poison soup that was easily disposed of by flushing down the drain. He had done this afterward, eager to be rid of the mess. It was going to be a long, hard few weeks for him.

He knew he wanted to get rid of the bitch after he found out that she had been involved with Rexroth. He got Morgan so hammered that Morgan had to fess up. And what did he do then?

He busted him in the kisser, hard. Morgan was tough, but Leland was that much tougher. The old scoundrel fell over in his chair, and tried to deny it. Said he'd been fooling. Said he was just trying to get the best of him. Well, piss on it. He was suspicious now, and that was all it took.

Besides, the insurance money was going to be sweet. It was going to be enough to open up a new set of offices, with new equipment. It was going to be enough to do a lot of things that he wasn't going to be needing Anna for anymore.

He had left that day, late in the afternoon, putting on his hat and this time, instead of giving her the silent treatment, he had very lovingly, very tenderly turned around and looked at her as she came down the stairs.

"Gone for the night?" She asked, hopefully.

He turned. She was as lithe, as beautiful as a young girl from County Cork could be. She had been all his, for awhile. But now, she seemed old. Tainted. He realized the thrill of possession was gone. Now, she seemed more like an interloper, a parasite than anything.

"Yes, dear, I'm going out to the Lodge. There's an emergency meeting tonight. Tony called and said it was mandatory. Sorry, my dear."

She looked strange for a moment.

"Sorry. What on earth are you sorry for?"

"For spending so much time away in the evenings. I have never let you in on what I do, but trust me, it's nothing that would jeopardize our marriage, or happiness. You have no reason to be suspicious of me, I mean to say. I am a man of honor. Truthfully

Ann, you've made me the happiest man in the entire world."

"And you've made me the happiest wife," she said, quietly, forcing a smile.

She looked at him as he stood there, taking in his huge frame, his sharp professional suit, his general "give 'em hell" bearing. He was so damned ugly, his nose a large, thick wedge, his eyes a deep, evil blue that seemed somehow to be so empty. So lifeless.

And he was an unnatural, aggressive man in bed. And a bit of a dud, to be quite frank.

"Well, must be going now, my dear. Don't wait up. I will probably be very late."

"Okay."

He walked quickly through the door, swinging his briefcase, his highly-polished shoes clacking. He walked down the sloping hill to the walk, and got into his car. He would then proceed out of town to a non-descript house used often for purposes of bootlegging and prostitution. It was at the end of a country road, and handled by a Negro pimp named Firpo Lewis.

Morgan would be waiting there. They would drink. Morgan owed him a couple of favors, and he had pretty much made his intentions apparent the night before, whether what Morgan was said was true or not. It didn't matter now. All he had thought about for the past three days was the life insurance policy he had taken out on Anna. Dear, sweet country girl from a foreign land, doomed to die in the Land of the Free.

It had a certain poetry about it that he found comforting.

At first he was going to panic because he thought the place was deserted, but he realized the cars must have been parked in the ancient barn in back.

He rolled into the front yard.

He knocked the code on the door.

"Cops."

He was let in quickly.

"Well I'll be a...it's Doc. Come on in. Mr. Rexroth is waiting for you."

"Firpo, you are a nigger after my own heart."

"Well, thank you sir. Sure is good of you to say."

"If they ever try to hang you just let me know. I'll come around with my buck knife, and set you loose. You hear me, boy?"

"Loud and clear, Doc. I hear you loud and clear."

The place was like some barren cross between a cocktail lounge and a criminal hideout. A few straggling, homely women sat around on buggy furniture, wearing yesterdays dismal refuse of dresses and frilly bed wear.

Rexroth sat at a battered old table in what, under normal circumstances, would have been a kitchen. He was playing solitaire and chain smoking. Beside him a bottle of cheap hooch was half-empty.

"Hey, so why do you want to do this so bad all of a sudden? You know I was just pulling a fast one. Why now?"

He crushed a cigarette, pulled another one and lit it. He barely looked at Leland. But that was okay.

"Anna, dear Anna, I have decided, has, uh, failed in her wifely duties. I have decided it is time to, uh, ah, well, as you well know, I am not a man to be frustrated. Or the sort of man to allow certain opportunities to go by, when opportunity knocks. I have recently had a mind to expand my medical practice."

Morgan nodded. He laid down a few more cards, inhaled his cigarette shakily, and didn't look up.

"So. You want to turn in one of the two favors I owe you, huh? And so. And so..."

"I just want to borrow a car. That's it."

Pause.

"So...you aren't going to be requiring any, ah, shall we say, any hands-on help? Just need some wheels. Cover you."

"Exactly."

Pause.

“She’s a doll. Wish you’d reconsider.”

He puffed his cigarette.

“You know I can’t refuse. You’re in the drivers seat. It’s yours. But if anything happens, you don’t know me. I’ve got contacts you know. In the joint.”

“Don’t threaten me.”

“Who’s threatening? I’m making you a promise. It’s out back. After you get done with it, ditch. I don’t want to know about it.”

“Okay.”

Leland got up slowly, feeling as if his head was spinning. He walked out the rickety kitchen door,

It was a bright day. It was going to be a black, star-shot night, according to the astronomy column in the Gazette. He walked out across the yard to the old barn.

Inside, a number of hot cars and equally hot parts were strewn over the wide, dirt-packed floor. He walked around the little collection as if he were actually going to buy one. He didn’t know a lot about cars, but he appreciated fine things. The contours, the colors, he liked a machine that looked like it had some thought put into it.

A pair of dirty pant legs poked out from beneath one car. Leland walked up to them and said, “Hey. Which one of these crates is operational?”

The legs, attached to a young man that hadn’t been expecting a sudden voice, bumped their unseen forehead against the underbelly of the chassis, and scrambled out, quickly standing up.

Before him, a filthy young man covered in grease and grime and missing a few front teeth stood, wondering if he was about to be beaten, shot, or arrested. Or some combination of the three.

“All be damned, man. Mister, you sure scared the hell out of me.”

Leland looked at the young hood. He was wearing one of those ridiculous damn hats that all the young men were wearing

now. Made them look like Jazz joint junkies. And he was *filthy*.

Leland made sure to stand a safe, clean distance.

“Looking to buy a car, huh?”

“Looking to take one. Your Boss owes me a big favor.”

“Well, I’m gonna have to talk to him first.”

The young man quickly walked out the barn door, across the yard, and into the kitchen in back of the house. He was a minor car thief, and a major mechanical mind. He doubled satisfactorily as a toady. He was wanted for murder and rape in Illinois.

He stuck his head in the screen door. Rexroth was pulling from the bottle, smoking, playing solitaire. A long-legged floozy was idly hovering over him. He seemed to take no notice.

“Boss? Boss, did you say this guy could take a car?”

Without looking up, Rexroth said, “Yeah. That is exactly what I said, Charlie. Furthermore, I want you to start paying more attention to people when they come over. You spend all your damn time in the garage. Doc is no stranger here.”

“Oh, okay boss.”

Rexroth turned around slightly. The floozy continued giving him his little massage.

“And another thing, Charlie...take a damn bath, for God’s sake. You smell like you rolled around in coyote shit. Got that?”

“Sure, boss.”

“Okay. Get Doc a car that runs good. Go on.”

Rexroth laid down an Ace and an eight. He frowned. He knew damn well what Anna had in store for her in the next few hours. It didn’t really chill his blood. After eight years at Durango Penitentiary he didn’t think anything could do that.

But it didn’t feed his appetite, either. Leland was one card short of being a full-blown psychopathic sadist. And he didn’t like doing business with guys like that. It made him triple uneasy.

“Okay, Doc. Boss said to get you a good car. These three

run pretty smooth. This one is probably your best bet.”

He walked around the showroom, stopping at a little black, nondescript Ford.

“Tell ya the truth, Doc. This here car probably runs the best. Purrs smoother than a pussy, if you ask me. But you may not want it. See, a guy done himself in in this car. Yeah. Hooked a hose from the exhaust and rolled up the windows. Took forever to air out the stink. You think that sort of thing makes a difference, mister? I think it does. I ain’t superstitious, ya understand...it’s just...”

“I’ll take this one.”

He was headed back out the dirt road and back toward town in a matter of minutes. Around him, the world seemed to darken down, cloud up, the wind blew through tall grasses and fields of corn held their stalks high in salutation to an angry god.

He had stopped and picked up an old suit in a second hand store, changed in the car, and parked down the street, pretending to read the paper until just after dusk. He could see her milling around up there, turning lights on and off, wasting his electricity. Running the damn bill up seemed to be her specialty. Well, he would turn her lights of tonight permanently. Then he could keep the house dim, dark, the way he liked it. He pulled from his pocket a short length of rope he had knotted especially for this particular occasion.

He waited. He waited. He got out of his car. He walked a piece up the sidewalk, casually, smoking a cigarette. He walked down to the end of the street, to the corner, right in front of his own residence, and looked up at the terrace window.

He could see her come out in the dark. She was like some sort of forlorn bird perched up there, her white gown blowing around her. He thought he could see a little teardrop trickle, faintly, down the corner of one cheek. It was bad stuff. It made him feel spooky. He shook it. He didn’t have time for sentimental reflection. There was work to be done.

He walked back up the walk, up the low inclining hill to his backyard property. He slowed a minute while he made his way through the garden.

He let himself in the basement door. Quietly, so quietly he was sure he wasn't even making a hint of noise, he climbed the basement steps, twisting the rope around his hand. He could feel his blood begin to rise. The only sound he could hear was the beating of his own heart.

He opened the basement door as quietly, as smoothly as a spy in an old movie. He walked out into the long kitchen, half-expecting to see the Negro maid slaving away at cleaning the oven in the dark. Well, he could keep the maid at least. Somebody would have to be here to clean up after his little messes.

He walked from the kitchen into the library. He was headed for the main hall, and the beautiful, ornate stairwell that twisted into the upper stories of his house. He walked slowly, cautiously, creeping along in the shadows. He could feel his heart hammer now. His groin was as rigid as a cold, steel flagpole on a November morning. He liked this. He enjoyed this immensely. The thrill of the hunt. Closing in for the kill.

He stopped, suddenly. Something was wrong. There was something in the room that didn't quite add up.

He looked down, suddenly, at an immense billiards table. He had never, in his life played billiards. He looked at billiards with extreme distaste. He considered the sport of very uncouth, slovenly men. *Quid pro quo*, there was no reason in all of heaven and earth that there should be a billiards table here, now, at eleven o'clock in the evening, when, several hours before there had been none. He spun around.

He was for a moment terrified that he had made a mistake. That, somehow, he had managed to enter the wrong house.

There was a small sort of couch affair he had never seen before. And lying on that couch, in what must have been an alcoholic stupor, was a young man that looked like he had just emerged from some shanty-town hell hole.

Tanner Benjamin was certain that, in his entire life, he had only ever seen a single ghost. But it was an experience he would never forget.

It had been the night he had stayed at Kevin's, drunk, miserable at the thought that Kevin was upstairs, at this very moment, defiling the one sublime object of his most heated infatuations. He had walked from the kitchen, after inspecting the refrigerator to make sure there were no severed heads in the ice box, and had walked back into the long, relatively bare room that served as a billiards room. He had lain down on the ratty old couch, the room spinning, the alcohol and marijuana he had imbibed reaching another bizarre sort of dip and climax affair. His circuitry was frying. His synapses were shooting multi-colored snake-like fireworks.

He fell into a wonderful, fearful, half-dreamlike, half hallucinatory world of dancing images and strange visions. It felt like time had ceased to be.

He then heard a sound that he assumed was somewhere outside of himself. He blearily opened his eyes. It was like a scuffling in the dark. He sat up, in terror that there might be some strange, giant rat lurking about in the old building while tried to sleep.

He jumped. Standing in front of him was a tall imposing man in a dark suit that looked like it came off the back of some dead gangster. He was wearing an old-time fedora, and his eyes burned like twin fires of coal. He was twisting a knotted piece of rope between his gloved hands.

"You're just a dream," he said suddenly. "I am drunk, I am stoned, and I am still sleeping."

Tanner lay back down, and shut his eyes, rolling over.

Leland looked at the image on the couch for a moment, and suddenly realized why today had seemed so strange. All day. Every day. It was like he was caught in some sort of loop. How

could he escape?

He turned, suddenly, and walked out the darkened, now-unfamiliar room. He headed back out the way he came. Except, when he got outside, everything else had changed, too. The garden was gone, and all that was left was a gravel driveway full of what he supposed were cars. But they looked so damn strange he wondered if they could fly. He walked out into the alley.

He knelt down by an overflowing trashcan, in an almost mockery of the famous statue of 'The Thinker. He sat for an interminable period of time, as memory and consciousness began to fade. When he finally came to, he was sitting in his study, going over some papers he wasn't, in the least, interested in. Today was the big day. He was driving out to the country to meet Rexroth.

He had a favor he wanted to cash in.

Tanner later realized he must have seen the ghost of Leland Durant. He heard faintly the story, just a few rumors, and was intrigued enough to check it out for himself first hand. He went to the archives at the University Library, began digging into local history, found out as much as he needed to know about Dr. Durant, the suspicious disappearance of his wife, the investigation, the insurance claim. It had all gone down in what was now a bunch of cheap sleeping-rooms. The same place he had passed out for the night.

Dr. Durant was suspected of illegal abortions. He was arrested in sixty-nine, at an ungodly age, for selling amphetamine to high school students. He had tried to stab the arresting officer that time.

But he always avoided an indictment. He had high-placed friends, locally. He was a Freemason, a friend to the KKK, and a friend to certain "crook-noses" that sometimes have interests in small towns. He shot two men to death in his own home, in his own office, because he claimed they were trying to "blackmail" him. Again, he got off scot-free.

He died in the mid-seventies, the only legal action every

taken against him being a revoking of his medical license after the amphetamine arrest. But he had been beyond retirement age anyway, and died four years later, an embittered old boogeyman. The local goblin. The stuff of dreary bedtime stories.

Or nightmares. Tanner would never forget the old photograph of Dr. Durant he managed to find in the microfiche at the library. His blood had chilled inside of him. He felt the tendrils of fear grip his spine.

The man in the photo had *exactly* the same face. It was a bad photograph, a picture of him entering a court room. But it was undeniably the same.

Tanner didn't sleep very well that night. He kept seeing those eyes. That mad, hungry look. That damned gaze of ultimate confusion.

He had seen death. And it had been terrible.

Fourteen

Boom!

The car had bounded over a hill, and landed with a crunch. It brought him back to the present situation for a moment. The present situation, where he was holding a gun on a young woman that was, rapidly, driving them toward whatever mad destination they had been heading to for the entire evening.

"Slow down, damnit!"

"Hey, you wanted me to drive, Tanner. So here we go! Now, where the fuck do we go?"

He thought for a moment. Where were they headed? In the backseat, Pat Ireland had now passed out, Milt Seebaum looked as if he might be on the verge of a coronary, and Tanner still had no idea where he was demanding that Sabrina drive to. He looked down at his watch again. He knew it was still working. But something was incredibly, unbelievably skewed.

"Sabrina. Sabrina!"

"What?"

“W-what time did you meet me?”

“What? What the fuck are you going on about now?”

“I said, I want to know what time we met tonight, Sabrina. Before you blew me. Before you kicked this whole fucking nightmare off. What time was it? Do you know?”

She considered.

“A couple of hours ago, perhaps.”

“No.”

“No. What the fuck do you mean, no? You’re just drunk, that’s all.”

“No, it’s been more, a lot more than a couple of hours Sabrina. I think you know that. Look at the fucking clock on your fucking CD player. It says two a.m. Do you think it should be two a.m.? Do you really fucking think that?”

He pushed the barrel of the gun into her temple. She smiled, swerved erratically, and said, “keep pushing it, mother fucker. I’ll wrap this fucking car around a tree.”

“Tanner, for the love of God, just get us to a hospital. I think I’m gonna be sick. Oh, I wanna go home, Milt! Make them take us home.”

“Jeezus, Pat, you’ve totally regressed. I’m with Tanner. For the first time tonight, I think I’ve realized---”

“You too, Prof?”

Tanner jerked his head around, looked at Milt. The Professor’s eyes held a sudden, deep philosophical cast that seemed to swim behind the bloodshot aura of the alcohol.

“Yeah. Big time. I understand now.”

Tanner turned to Sabrina viciously, and spat, “Take us to Delcinos! I think I know what this is all about.”

The car swerved, throwing them all to the side, and attracting the attention of a parked cruiser that was waiting in the alley between two buildings. Suddenly, lights flared up, a siren wailed into life.

“Don’t stop. Don’t you fucking stop, for anything.”

“Didn’t plan on it.”

The little girl bounced and rocked in the seat behind her mother, as the car sped through the night. In front of them, Bruce and the stripper he had hired for the night were doing their best to shake the tail. But now it had progressed into a cinema car chase.

“Motherfucker...I’m gonna catch you tonight, if it’s the last thing that I do.”

Jill Lavender was having a merry good time. Her blood was boiling. She was going to beat the shit out of whoever he was with, then she was going to scratch his eyes out. If that wasn’t good enough, she had a pair of scissors in the glove box. One good jab in the testes and even the mighty Bruce McGonnagill might have trouble getting a boner again. She sped up. They turned sharply. She turned. They sped up again, cut down an alley, and she did just the same.

“W-what does your sister want to chase you for?”

Bruce said between nearly-clenched teeth, “She thinks I owe her some money, or something. Has always had this thing about me and chicks that she thinks are loose. I dunno, she’s fucking crazy, that’s all.”

He swerved again, headed back down a sort of rising hill, got back out on to main, and then decided to head for the university campus. What the fuck. Delcinos would be packed. They could lose her in the crowd.

He started across the bridge, way over the speed limit, and suddenly both cars were being tailed. Lights flared. Sirens wailed.

“Oh shit. Oh fucking shit. No, this can’t be happening.”

The stripper put her head down into her hand, wishing she had never agreed to fuck this guy for dough. Now, they had some crazy bitch and a fucking cop on their tail. And she couldn’t afford to get busted again. Last time, the Boss had had to bail her out, and he made damn sure that every penny of it came out of her ass.

“Don’t worry baby,” said the ever-confident Bruce

McGonnagill.

In truth, he was worried, now. A lot worried. He didn't really, know how he was going to get out of this. He might have been able to shake Jill. But now, if someone didn't pull over soon, they were all going to be in a lot of trouble.

He could feel his permanent erection begin to deflate, somewhat.

Skimmy was having a ball. He could bounce around in the back all he wanted, and Jill would never see him.

"Skimmy? Skimmy, is mommy going to get in trouble?"

Lindsey sent her thoughts to Skimmy, whose legs dangled off her right shoulder. He considered.

"Probably. But don't worry, kid. If anything happens to her, I'll take you to a special place. A place just for special people. A magic place."

Lindsey could feel a huge swell of grief in her throat, suddenly.

"B-but Skimmy," she thought. "I don't want to go to a special place."

But he didn't answer her. The car took another swerve, still followed closely by the cop car. Ahead, Bruce was busily trying to figure out how tonight had, suddenly, taken such a bad turn.

The cashier at the pharmacy was a wildly unimpressive young man that looked like he still hadn't lost his virginity. Mary Ann had purchased a box of Trojan lubricated and some chewing gum. She was curious.

"What do you think about ribbed?"

"Ribbed what?"

"Condoms. Do you prefer ribbed, or? I find that ribbed seems to like, *totally* be more satisfying as far as sensation during sex."

She didn't know why she was trying to embarrass him.

Maybe it was the shock of red hair. Maybe the freckles.

"I uh, don't usually discuss stuff like that with customers. I guess ribbed would be as good as any. A rubber is a rubber."

"You don't get laid much, do you?"

Oh boy, she thought. She was wired tonight. She was out for blood.

He looked at her for a minute as if he wanted to slap the cold shit out of her. Instead, he said, "Well, to be perfectly honest, no. I haven't had a piece of ass in nigh on a year. What's it to you?"

"Just a guess. Would you like to get laid more often?"

"Sure. Wouldn't everyone? I guess I've never, exactly, been real popular with the ladies."

His self-deprecation was a major turn-off, but she didn't let it faze her. He probably just needed to rack up a few successes, get his confidence going. She leaned over the counter a little. Her cleavage seemed to catch his eye.

"How much?"

He seemed, for a moment, like he didn't know what she was saying.

"Oh, for the condoms. Okay, that will be 5.85"

He was going to put them in a little paper baggie, but she told him to forget it, and slipped them in her purse. She stood there. The 24 hour pharmacy was quite dead at this late of an hour.

She looked at him. She couldn't say he didn't have any potential. He was sort of cute, in a homely way. In fact, he was the type you sort of felt sorry for, wanted to mother. If he played his cards right, maybe she would give him a sympathy fuck.

"So. What's your name?"

"Dylan."

She looked down. She fancied she could see a bulge begin in the crotch of his jeans.

"You want to get together sometime? Have some fun?"

She drew the words out, suggestively. He was probably

about to come in his pants.

She walked out to the parking lot, after exchanging phone numbers. What the hell, if she didn't feel like meeting him again, she didn't have to. That was the way it worked these days, in her world.

She started the car. Now, Delcinos.

The young man with the beard was known around campus for his affable, easy manner and his corny sense of humor. He had a sort of scruffy face, and a dark curly shock of hair that would have been more appropriate in 1977. He was enamored of Bob Dylan. He sometimes played guitar at Open Mic night.

Tonight he was wearing a very obnoxious hat that had two puppet hands on the front. When you pulled a string hanging from the bill, the hands clapped. He had purposely worn it into Delcinos this evening, just to make the girls take notice.

"Hey baby, nice hat."

A tall, shapely young woman in a skimpy outfit walked by him, holding a fresh beer, and sat at a bar stool. The bartender, Sykes, and a little perky assistant manager named Debra, were flying on several different types of over-the-counter speed, and doing their best to keep up with a variety of different drink orders. The music was pounding.

At a nearby table. Lance and the singer of *Poison Betty* sat, taking in the scenery. It was packed tonight. In fact, they had never seen the University Village area that crowded. The porch out front was spilling over with young, drunk bodies. The night seemed to have no end. It was all about being young, and staying awake forever.

"Hey guys, what the fuck's up?"

The young man with the clapping-hands hat approached, elevated himself to a stool miraculously, and generally didn't realize he was not welcome at their table.

The hook-nosed woman looked away. Fucking creep, she

thought. He had come on to her before, at a party. She had a serious distaste for his type.

Lance took a swig of beer, said, “ We’re escaping from Kevin Hickman.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, he showed up at the house, unannounced. One of these days I’m going to kill him and be done with it.”

“I’ll help you hide the body.”

He turned, looked at the woman sitting next to him.

“So, uh, how are you doing tonight?”

She frowned. Time to be polite.

“Oh, you know, just trying to have fun.”

He smiled, tried to shake off the subliminal feeling of creeping repulsion she had projected his way, and raised his beer.

“I propose a toast. To the Fall Semester, may it pass quickly.”

“Here, here.”

Lance raised his glass, toasted, pounded back the brew. The hook-nosed woman put her head in her hand, and looked off into the crowd. Talking was almost impossible, over the roar of conversations and pumping music. She wished she had just went home and read a book.

In the kitchen, Gary and Keith had managed to put the finishing touches on closing down the grill. The buzz was wearing thin, but Gary had an even more apprehensive, more paranoid feeling than ever. Nothing had made sense tonight. What was he doing here? Was this going to be the next ten years of his life?

Every once in awhile, Keith Decker would turn around, look at Gary nervously, and ask him if he was okay, all the time thinking, *that’s the last time I ever share a joint with you, fucker.*

But Gary was a trooper. He did what he had to do, despite the heavy, panic feeling in his chest that wouldn’t go away.

It would be alright. God was still in his heaven. This was still America. He was still his father’s son. He put away the last of the dishes, leaned against the sink, wiped sweat from his brow.

He hadn't bothered to call his girlfriend, figuring she would show up sooner or later. But she hadn't popped in all evening, and she usually did when he was working.

Tonight, everything was, somehow, *wrong*.

Fifteen

There are situations in life that are so comic, absurd, and altogether unconventional, that one hesitates to think of them even happening in the realm of what we consider to be reality. The well-documented coincidences of life are not so fortuitous as we might suspect. Consider the fate of those that were doomed to be in exactly the wrong place at the wrong time. Like the people who just happened to be crossing the University of Texas campus when Charles Whitman decided to climb to the top of the bell tower and open fire. Or the people doomed to die in the blazing inferno of the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001.

It is as if God decides, even in the face of all better logic, that some people are just doomed to the tragic fate that they suffer arbitrarily, while others, perhaps less-qualified humans altogether, are spared for reasons that we find wholly inexplicable.

Such was the case on that strange night when life at the U.C.U campus was torn completely asunder for anyone that happened to get caught into the cyclone sweep of events that culminated in so much tragedy.

To fully understand the situation as it played itself out, it is important to understand the order of events as they transpired, and to examine the way in which, if fate had played it out somewhat differently, such tragedies as the mass-murder of young people who were so unfortunate to choose Delcinos to be the place they opted to spend that particular Saturday night could and can, henceforth, be avoided. Or, at the very least, understood.

But it is a mesmerizing, unlikely set of events; a true

comedy of errors on all parts. A great fuck of the order of logical events. It must not happen again.

To begin with, the truck that was speedily being chased by the car that was being driven by Jill Lavender that was being pursued by Officer Josh Tilden, was doing over twice the legal speed limit. The officer, having already radioed for help, was now being accompanied by another squad car, in hot pursuit.

As they approached the University campus, they were met with increased, and erratic traffic, some of which, apparently, had not counted on having to pull over to keep out of the way of the speeding caravan. The campus area, to be specific, was a lot of little intersecting streets and crossways, and tonight, of all nights, it was decidedly busy, with creeping cars cruising around every corner.

It was, approximately three miles from the Delcinos Bar and Grill when the accident (which, if it had transpired differently, could have, ironically, managed to save the soul of the little girl that crouched, terrified, behind her mother's front seat) occurred. We claim it *could have* transpired differently, we can't be sure about a great many things concerning that night. Shakespeare wrote, "like flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us just for sport."

Yes. Certainly, he knew wherefore he spoke, particularly in regard to this tragic situation.

It was on the side street that ran between a corner bar called Speakeasy, and a Village Pantry, that a marauding gang of drunken young frat brothers would totally demolish the hot car that had been provided them out of the easy and free bank account of the driver's lawyer father. The father had used his expertise and connections to rescue his son from legal troubles on two separate occasions. Well, third time was a charm.

It was drunken idiocy that ignored the stop sign. It was Newtonian physics that demanded the ensuing collision. It was a spinning, totaled cop car that got them all arrested. It was a gift from the gods that let the two cars in front speed ahead, and

avoid capture.

In the backseat, a sudden jolt had caused Lindsey to hit the back of her cranium against the lower part of the driver's seat door. Lindsey, who had never before in her life experienced any sort of head trauma, was instantly knocked cold. Jill was still unaware of her presence. Jill was doing sixty in a thirty, with her teeth gritted in anger.

"Oh shit! Oh fucking shit! Did you see that?"

The young prostitute put her face in her hands. She could envision months in jail, being drooled over by bull dykes, fresh meat. She hated jail worse than she hated being broke, being dumped, being.

"Yeah I fucking saw that! Yeah. It was fucking great. We're home free."

"Let me the fuck out of here! I'm walking home! You're fucking crazy! You're gonna get me fucking busted again!"

Bruce turned, put out his hand, and slapped her as hard as he possibly could.

"Shut the fuck up! I already paid, and I'm getting my money's worth."

He sped up. Another few blocks and he was home free. Then, it would be out to the country. To fuck. And fuck. And drop this bitch off and let her walk fifty miles back to town, if she gave him any lip.

A man like Bruce McGonnagill knew how to deal with these situations.

At exactly the same moment, by the decree of God and whatever black angels policed the various and sundry frequencies of the span of human existence, Kyle and Darren were prowling the streets downtown, trying to work up the same sense of utter resilient fury that had birthed their hideous plan from the beginning.

They had seen a truck, a little foreign model car, and two cop cars chasing each other like flies chase a shit wagon, while they had been camped out in an alley, loading their guns and

making all the necessary preparations that would ensure a maximum kill count. They had studied their terrain. They knew their business. It was all a matter of a few more minutes, a quick goodbye, a way to look at what they knew must necessarily be their last moments on earth.

“Jesus...are we being chased?”

“Let’s avoid them if at all possible. Are you fucking ready? It’ll take ten minutes from here.”

Darren breathed in. Darren breathed out. His pulse was pounding. His head was swimming. Suddenly, he was sure that he must be dreaming this.

“Yeah. I love you Kyle. Only for you, man.”

“Only for you.”

They leaned over and kissed. One last kiss. Judas had set the standard, long ago.

Then, they headed out of the alley. On the CD player, a song from Slayer.

It was “Altar of Sacrifice”, from the EP *Reign in Blood*.

And it was time.

Sixteen

Tanner, Sabrina, Milt, and Patricia had dealt with the cop as best they could. But it was apparent that Sabrina was a master at manipulation. And, also, was highly proficient at passing roadside sobriety tests.

When they had finally pulled over, the gun being hastily hidden under the seat, the cop had been irate. But Sabrina had simply explained that she had mistakenly hit the gas when he had turned on his lights, and that the car was a soused-up model. It was delicate. The cop looked slightly less-than-convinced.

“Officer, I am like so sorry about this. I am the designated driver for the night. Haven’t had a drop myself. I just kind a

panicked when I saw you, and though I meant to pull over...I guess my foot hit the accelerator by accident.”

“Yeah. Well, miss, I’m going to have to ask you to take a roadside sobriety test. Could you please step out of the car, miss.”

Oh great, thought Tanner. *Here goes.*

Sabrina stepped casually out of the driver’s seat. She stood, facing the officer. She smiled. She had been through this before.

“Now, tilt your head back, put your hands out, and touch the tip of your nose.”

Tanner sat in the front seat, shaking. He wanted to get to Delcinos. He HAD to get there. The knowledge was pounding in his brain harder than all the alcohol he had drank that evening.

She did it expertly.

“Okay. Well. You see this yellow line?”

“You mean the road line, sir?”

“Yeah,” he said, clearly missing the sarcasm.

“And?...”

“Walk that line, Miss.”

“Um, yes sir.”

He shined his light down on her feet. She walked the line flawlessly. Back, and forth. Back, and forth. The cop looked like he might shit brass Twinkies. It was, apparently, their night.

“Okay...um, if you could step back here with me a minute.”

“Oh, um okay. In your car?”

“Yeah.”

Tanner could not believe it. It defied any and all scientific logic. He was beginning to wonder if, perhaps, Sabrina was not the living, breathing daughter of the Prince of Darkness.

She opened the passenger-side door, and the cop scooted in next to her. Several dozen cars drove by slowly, and ogled, as cars are wont to do when they are driving and see that somebody has been pulled over for not being a responsible driver. Tanner looked back. He could see Sabrina blowing into a breathalyzer. Milt said, “Well, I don’t know how in the fuck she managed to

walk the line, but she's dead meat now. Tanner, if I didn't think that we would, somehow, all be hauled off to the slammer I would tell that cop exactly what is going on."

"Don't do that man. Not yet. Milt, do you know what you told me earlier? While we were in the bar?"

He looked for a minute at Patricia Ireland. Patricia, who had passed the point of being a nuisance, had clammed up suddenly, and was staring out the window coughing in a near sob.

"Oh Milt. What happened? What happened to make tonight so...fucking..."

"Crazy? Patricia, if you hadn't insisted we come along, we wouldn't be involved in all this. Now, we just witnessed that young lady back there shoot a man. In cold blood. Do you know what that could do to our careers? Our lives?"

He suddenly looked at Tanner.

"Tanner, if she comes back to the car, you will have her drive us somewhere safe...somewhere near my apartment. Won't you?"

He looked desperate beyond desperate. Tanner, who had by now already figured out, or so he thought, the entire situation, turned and said,

"Yes. Of course. I'll take care of this. I started this, and I'll be the one to finish it. But, Prof, you never answered the question I asked you. Remember what you asked me, about how you thought this might be some kind of dream?"

He looked blank for a moment, then said:

"Yeah...oh yeah. I told you I thought that I had been dreaming."

Tanner looked as sincere as it was possible for him too.

"Sir, Milt, Prof...we are dreaming. None of this is real. We've, or maybe I should say, *I have invented this all...*"

"You're fucking losing it, Tanner," Patricia Ireland croaked. She had sat up, and was looking more sober, more altogether herself. She also looked drowned in despair, and like she had a splitting migraine.

“Am I? Am I fucking losing it? How many people can shoot someone with silent gunfire, huh? How many? How about this entire fucking night? How long has it been? How long have we been together tonight? What the fuck has happened to time?”

“Shh! You don’t want to attract...”

Tanner lowered his voice. Sabrina was still sitting with the cop. They seemed to be in a heated discussion, of some sort.

Patricia said, “ If you’re right...Tanner. If this is your dream, or nightmare, or whatever...then it must be a lucid dream. Or some kind of psychic state. And you’ve brought us in.”

Her voice was the dragging of tires, but he knew she was sobering up.

“This has been the fucking longest night of my life.”

Milt put his face in his hands, his elbows resting on his long legs.

“Really Milt? Check your watch. According to your watch, it’s only been four hours.”

Mary Ann had pulled into the parking lot of Delcinos, had made sure to lock the door. Punk rock kids were skateboarding in the parking lot, completely ignoring the “no skateboarding” signs that had been posted and defaced all over campus. Well, she thought, God bless the icky bastards. At least they have the balls to do what they want.

She took one last look at herself in the rear-view mirror, fixed her lipstick, and pulled down her skirt. She was showing a lot of leg.

But that’s good. He’ll want that. All men are pigs, so...

She clicked across the parking lot in stiletto hills, walked around the corner, past small groups of college freshman with their first taste of campus party life still stewing in their guts at 2:00 a.m. It was almost time for that final round. It was time to get busy.

The patio was still swinging. Management must have left it

open. Normally, it would have been closed by now, the chairs taken in, the tables stacked. The streets, though, had already started to clear out a bit. Apparently Quad Bash was coming to it's annual end.

She walked around the front and flashed her ID.

"No cover."

She blew the doorman a kiss, and entered, walking around in the crowd for a minute. Damn. The place looked like it was about a hundred warm bodies over-capacity.

She had taken some cheap speed, to get her sex drive going overtime. Ephedrine always made her a jubilant, sexual animal.

It also made her extremely edgy. She looked around for Beth.

Where the fuck was she?

It might be helpful, at this point, to explain the unique, L-shaped architecture that was a part of the entire Delcinos experience. It aided and abetted the disaster that was shortly to follow.

The entrance looked out on what was, during the day, the no-smoking section of the dining room. It was a collection of heavy tables lining a long section of tall windows that faced the bar, and between the windows and the bar, a selection of shorter tables. The Bar was a sort of thick, wooden semi-circle, lined by benches, and directly behind was the waitress station, complete with average waitress-station paraphernalia, such as glasses, silverware, bus tubs, and the regulation window where steaming plates of Delcines-brand sit down fast food was thrust through. To the extreme left of this was the ungodly-heavy, swinging, kitchen door.

There were several wall-mounted TV sets, a sound-system and stage Kati-cornered to the bar, and on the far side, separated by a wooden partition a few video games and several more booths. The restrooms were back there, also.

In the men's room, a very shady little girl in a flowery dress

that looked like it could have been ripped off a half-naked body at Woodstock, was camped out in a stall with her dread-locked boyfriend, Beau. They were passing amongst a circle of friends and strangers a very powerful, very good joint.

“Hey man, party down, what the fuck...”

She passed the joint to Beau, and put out an incredibly skinny arm to embrace a girlfriend that had just come into the stall to join them.

The girl, a svelte tom-boy creature that was inordinately beautiful, was intoxicated, typically, in almost exact proportion to her own meager body weight. She worked in a massage parlor. She had corn-yellow hair, the slimmest, most wonderful hips, and a pleasant flower child way about her. She wore large, knitted caps.

Tanner, who had met her several months ago at a house party, had been, oddly, instantly, taken with her. He had wandered into the party at the behest of a friend, certain that someone who was as overworked as himself deserved an evening of house-party frolic. He had walked in, had had little room to move considering the press of warm bodies in and out, and had been terrified the entire evening that the DEA were going to bust the door down.

A central room of the small house had been reserved for a circle of pot smokers, a sort of standing, communal circle. The marijuana was a thick, tangible presence that curled through the room like a slithering serpent. Tanner managed to get several cups from the keg outside. That eased him. That really eased him.

The rooms filled up, the rooms thinned, strangers came in, partook of weed, booze, whatever, then mysteriously vanished. Did the walls eat them alive? Were they merely an hallucination? Tanner still was not sure.

He had sat down in a big, fluffy chair, looking at flower children girls dance to the accompaniment of Bob Marley and eighth-generation Grateful Dead clones.

She had come up to him, her little lithe body enticing him

in his inebriated state. She held a single stick of incense as if it was a sacred flower. It was an incredibly Hindu sentiment.

But she had drank herself to oblivion within a few hours. She was forced upstairs. Following her, unbeknownst to Tanner, were her roommate and her roommates...boyfriend? Lover? One night stand?

Tanner was drunk. He stumbled up the stairs after them, his feet defying gravity, each step threatening to bring him plummeting back downward, toward a broken neck. Here, that would be fatal. Here, ambulances were unknown. This was not your daddy's Western World.

There was a slight step-off at the top of the stairs. Tanner found himself confronted by two different doors. It was like the decision between the red and green pill. Take the red pill, we go home, we sleep it off, we forget about the nightmare. Take the green pill, and we see reality exposed in it's naked, ugly horror. We wake up, surrounded by bloodthirsty aliens, hungering for dimensional juice, seeking to suck the liver and spleen of fertile human soul-meat.

But Tanner, after a lifetime of bad luck, was not lucky enough to take the red pill. No red pill here. He couldn't have just walked into a closet and passed out, no. God had to expose Tanner, bring him out into the naked sunlight, with his sagging elephant-flesh exposed to the critique of the flapping gums of mother nature's normal progeny. And what progeny.

He had liked that little tom-boy, had thought she had a soul as incandescent as a burning flame. And was he the moth? Would she, in her equally drunken state, accept the florid sloppy kisses of a raving Tanner, who had followed her upstairs in a torrid passionate fervor to have but one warm willowy wiry embrace from the tawny young lass?

Instead, he felt like he had just walked into the darkened precinct of some bad euro-porn flick that got major hits on that vast web of unconsciousness referred to as the World Wide Internet. His angel, his hippie cherub, his scrubby Juliet was

defiling her wanton form with not only her roommate, but her roommate's boyfriend, another young blackguard, and several other people watching and participating in various and sundry combinations of lewd unseemliness. Even the man in the clown suit seemed to have lost all sense of decency and righteousness. And, what was worse, they were doing it with the lights on, in full view of the dog.

The dog.

Tanner had never seen a human-being shape-shift before, and considering the free-flow of hallucinogens that had been hitherto available, he was not sure, in fact, if he was actually seeing it now. But *he was seeing it*. A room full of orgiastic depravity suddenly transformed itself, one image clicking over another, until the entire room was nothing but a vast spawning ground of gyrating, thrusting, orgasmic lizard-types. The sound was something akin to the moans of the damned and desolate that are said to emit from the gates of Hell itself.

Suddenly, an all-too-human foot was thrust back from the hard-wood floor. Tanner gasped. It had been severed at the ankle.

"By God---*your all damned cannibals too!*" He blurted.

It had been a mistake. The illusion shifted, the wave-patterns and psychic frequencies were re-aligned in accordance with the grid-reality of the agreed-upon illusion.

A young male bounded off the bed (where his Juliet and her roommate lay sprawled in heathen fashion) spat at Tanner angrily, pushed his chest, and slammed the door. Tanner stumbled drunkenly at the top of the stairs, unsure of what, exactly, he had been a witness too. And, truthfully, he never did reason it out.

Mary Ann made her way around the wooden partition, looked around in the crowd, and let out an inward shriek. Oh, this was rich. Oh, this was just fucking great.

There he sat. The boy-type. The horny dickhead. The guy she wanted to bag like yesterday's groceries. And she found Beth

too, except Beth was one of the biggest bitches walking, and before the evening was over, Mary Ann would prove that. Backstabbing cunt. Jealous, petty, bitch.

Mary Ann pounded her way past the pool tables to the booth that was only occupied by Beth and, oh, what's-his-name...she struggled to remember. From the looks of it, they had been getting real chummy, real quick. Mary Ann was sure his big, strong masculine hand was probably moving, from Beth's bony little knee and traveling to a firm docking bay halfway up her ass. They were both doing the hard, horny stare-down, the same look that usually preceded the knocking boots.

She stood over them for a second before they even realized that she was there. Beth suddenly turned, smiled a shit-eating grin, as if to say, 'look bitch, I don't know what the fuck you had planned, but I have just made a major score in about thirty minutes or so, so there.'

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Her voice was so sedate, so exasperatedly calm, that Mary Ann actually surprised herself. But her blood was pumping. Furious. Furious. Now she had a vision of shooting nails from her teeth.

"I...uh, well, how do I explain this, Rod..."

"Uh, Todd."

"Yeah...*right*, you're Todd. Oh, God, you're *gorgeous*..."

Beth was already fucking plastered. Mary Ann could tell. The bitch was pronouncing all her s sounds the wrong way. Making an inflection as if every s word was going to mutate into some bizarre adaptation of the word *shit*. So was *show*. *Gorgeous* was *gorjushhh*...It really made her *shkein* crawl.

Mary Ann lost it.

"Why-in-the-fuck-did-you-invite-me-here?"

Beth goggled. Todd looked as if he was mildly amused. Hmm. Two babes fighting over him. Not bad. But why should they fight when there was plenty of him to share?

He started to say something to this effect, but was cut-off

suddenly:

“You’re always doing this kind of shit to me, Beth. And I’m fucking sick of it. I’m, I’m...you fucking bitch. You fucking bitch...I could rip your goddamned eyes out.”

Beth smiled, giggled, looked arrogantly superior, and started to rise from the booth slightly. She sat back down, for a moment too scared of the confrontation. But the alcohol was rising to her brain. What right did fucking Mary Ann have to be a bitch tonight? How often did *she* have a night like tonight, when the most gorgeous man in the bar was all over her? She had sat like a third wheel herself, plenty of times.

“Okay bitch, if you want to step to this shit.”

“Oh, you’re gonna try to be all bad now?”

“Hey fuck you , bitch, I could kick your fat ass around the block!”

Suddenly, the two women were upon each other, ripping hair, scratching eyes, screeching like banshees. Mary Ann clearly had the upper hand. She was speeding like a train, had a foot on the opposition, and was as mad as hell.

People moved out of the way, crowded around, and started placing bets. Mary Ann slammed Beth into a video game up against the back wall. Someone alerted the bouncers that there was a cat fight.

Vicious profanity was uttered, yelled, hissed, laughed, shrieked, groaned, moaned, and threatened. Beth had a wonderful, fresh claw mark across her face, and Mary Ann was struggling with one of the bouncers. Beth leapt forward, ready to make another attack at the enemy, now that she had been subdued. A large male that had recently paroled from Michigan City Prison stepped forward, grabbed arms, not in the manner in which he had been trained, but in the manner he knew afforded him the greatest tactile sensations available from holding a drunken, violent, wriggling female body. He smiled, liking his new job.

There was only one problem. With him and his co-worker busy getting things under control, the door was not being

guarded. ID's were not being checked. Why, *anybody* could slip in in the next few minutes. And that could lose them their liquor license.

Anybody.

They shushed as the staccato rhythm of Sabrina's boots tick-ticked back along the road, and the lanky young woman popped open the door.

"I can't believe it...she fucking blew zeros."

Patricia Ireland sounded like she had just woken up after major surgery. Her voice was a combination of gravel and dragging rubber.

"Honey," said Sabrina turning, smiling. "That's not all I blew."

Tanner suddenly dove down, and searched frantically under the seat. He dove back up.

"Looking for this?"

Sabrina held up the gun. That. Tanner. Had. Just. Hidden.

"It's---"

"Not possible? I know, Tanner. I can't fucking figure it out either."

The cop pulled out first, and drove away quickly. Sabrina was next. She was even quicker.

Bruce sped through the University Village, certain now that the evening was his. All danger had been dealt with by the hands of fate. Behind him, Jill Lavender still pursued with full intent of hacking his drunken nuts off. But what did he care? As long as he wasn't going to jail.

He passed the coffee shop. Book store. Pizza place.

Boom! Crunch!

Suddenly, the truck exploded. Thick tendrils of smoke started wafting up from beneath the hood. He sputtered to a slow crawl, able just to steer it to the nearest parking lot. Right in back

of fucking Delcines. She was one stop light behind him.

Now, she would catch him. Now, he and his whore would go on foot. Now, the jig was fucking up, for sure.

He had read a book once, had Bruce McGonnagill. It had had some line in it, some piece of poetry that had always stuck with him. Something about *things falling apart*.

He had known from birth that his luck was shit. Oh well, you just got use to it after awhile.

“That’s it motherfucker, I am *so* out of here.”

The hooker grabbed up her purse furiously, opened the door, and flew out, still cursing. Bruce caught her shoulder, expertly, with one huge, rough hand.

“If you split now, baby, I might decide to call in an anonymous tip about your place of employment. A place of prostitution. I bet your boss would be real happy about that, wouldn’t he?”

She turned her head back, and for an instant he thought she actually bought it. Then a vicious pain exploded on his knuckles.

She had sank her teeth into them.

“You fucking bitch!”

She bolted, losing her heels, ran across the lot, and was gone into the night. He stood there, knuckles smarting. He had wasted an entire paycheck on that bitch. He had nothing to show for it.

He sat, half in and half out of the truck, one long leg dangling out to the pavement. Jill would pull in any minute. She had seen which way he had gone. His truck was shot to shit. It was still smoking. Well, be damned if he would just sit out here and let her find him sulking. To start a fight. The Mother of all Domestic Difficulties. To call him the bastard that he knew he was. To castrate him.

He slid out of the cab, slammed the door of his piece-of-shit truck, and walked across the lot and around to the front entrance. The patio, for goddamn sake, was still full. Odd. This

was definitely fucking party night. Morning.

Not for me, he thought, with the bitter realization that life meant no joys for him. No joys whatsoever.

And there was no one waiting at the door, either. Odd.

She pulled into the parking lot with a screech, saw the truck, smoke billowing out of the hood and laughed, ferociously, to herself. So the mother fucker had had to ditch his truck, huh? All the better. He must have taken that bitch and went inside Delcinos. It was time to even the score.

She drove back out front, and parked behind the coffee house adjacent to Delcinos. The party on the enclosed bar patio next door was still hopping. Somebody asked her if she went both ways.

She walked across the street as quickly as she could. On this side, the patio in front of Delcinos was still packed to capacity. It was a rare night, even on the U.C.U. Campus.

Quad Bash. First of the year. Everyone got stinking drunk, and fucked each other silly. It was like some sort of obscure religious rite that had been handed out by convenient extraterrestrial visitors at the dawn of the human age. Or, well, maybe it was all just part of “college life”. She didn’t know, and right now, she didn’t give a fuck.

She approached the door, saw no doorman, decided she wouldn’t pay a cover even if he had insisted, and walked in.

Several large masses of people were shuffling around a catfight that had started just a second or two earlier. Two bimbettes were busily being held down by burly, sweaty, meaty bouncers. The kind of men that were regulation dickheads. The kind of men she liked.

She walked through the crowd. Was he taking a piss? Sorry bastard. She wanted to rip some flesh herself this evening.

Suddenly, there he was, sitting beyond the melee at a little booth that he had all to his lonesome. Unless that bitch was taking a piss. She also noticed he hadn’t bought a beer. He had already

blown all his dough.

Good.

It would all add fuel to the fire.

She bumped and pushed her way through drunken college kids, until she could make her way to the back booth. It was time.

Lindsey came to a few moments later. Mommy had left the car. It was all dark. She was very scared.

Suddenly, Skimmy appeared on the seat above her.

“You can get up now Lindsey. In fact, you better. We have to go in there and help mommy.”

She rubbed her head, and began to crawl up onto the back seat. She sat for a moment next to Skimmy, and felt like weeping. Even with the doors closed and the windows rolled up, she could hear the noise all around her. The noise of older kids, partying and listening to loud music. The noise of yelling and shrieking and laughing. It sounded like a war was going on outside.

“Skimmy...I’m afraid.” In fact, she was petrified. What would mommy do, when she saw that Lindsey had acted like some stowaway kid in a pirate story, and come with her out to get Bruce?

Skimmy smiled. His teeth looked like black little stumps. He said, “No reason at all to be afraid, darling. I swear by my own beard that you’re gonna be okay. I’ll be with you. Ain’t nothing to worry about.”

She began to snifle.

“You promise?”

“Of course. Have I ever lied to you? Now, just follow me.”

Skimmy turned, and jumped through the closed car door. She frowned. She hated it when he did that sort of thing. It always gave her the creeps.

She could hear people behind the big wooden fence to her left. They sounded kind of stupid, like they had been drinking, and that scared her, because she knew drunk people often did

things that they wouldn't do under normal circumstances. She hated drunk people, badly.

Skimmy appeared again, right in front of her, and began to run across the very dark parking lot to the road, where it was brighter. He had an oh-so excited look on his face.

He looked back over his shoulder as he ran, and waved his arm.

"C'mon, we'll be late!"

Late for what?, she thought, but followed as quick as she could, not wanting to be alone outside.

And, miraculously, nobody seemed to notice a little girl in an old nightgown running, unattended, into a bar at two in the morning.

Some people are just all about themselves.

Sabrina drove calmly, steadily, through the streets, and that was okay, because now Tanner knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that tonight had been pre-ordained. It was as if reality was slipping as comfortably into the well-worn glove of last night's nightmare as if it had been tailor-made to suit him. There was an awesome quiet in the car, and all seemed to share, at the same time, the same vision. It had settled over them, silently, magnificently, beckoning them onward, in an awesome, frightening sense.

Now, Milt had stopped asking if they could be taken home, or dropped off anywhere in between. Now, it was as if he had resigned himself, for unspecific reasons, to simply see the rest of the situation through, to whatever end may be in store.

Patricia put her encircled her arm with his. She was looking dead ahead now, barely cognizant of the streetlights and scenery as it whizzed by. They had all been put under hypnosis, it seemed.

"Milt?" She asked.

"Yes, Patricia?"

Pause.

“Do you like me? I mean, do you really, really like me?”

Her voice was stone-cold sober. She was not kidding, not being paranoid. She was simply asking him a very easy, serious, sobering question.

“Yes Patricia,” he stated flatly. “I like you very, very much. If we make it out of this in one piece, I have a proposal. Let’s get married.”

She was silent.

“Are you serious?”

“I’ve never been more serious in my life, I’m afraid.”

She stared straight ahead. No change of expression.

“Then, I accept your proposal, Milt. I think you’ll make a good husband.”

Tanner, his eyes watering heavily, his skin a strange series of electrical prickles, turned and looked at them, asking, “So you guys feel it to?”

They both nodded, and Milt murmured, “I think, young man, I may have just regained my sense of the uncanny. I had lost it for quite sometime.”

“There’s a spirit in here with us,” Patricia stated flatly.

Tanner turned suddenly, shocked. He looked at Sabrina. Her face had taken on a terrifying new caste. It had, somehow, subtly altered. She didn’t look like Sabrina anymore, but she was. She looked like an android, more than anything. She was *The Sabrinator*.

He didn’t ask her anything. He was sure she wouldn’t answer.

He leaned back in his seat, and dreaded the familiar sites of the U.C.U. Village. He closed his eyes, and began to pray.

Jill walked over to Bruce, who was sitting with his head down. He looked as if he might leave here and put the barrel of a shotgun into his mouth. It made her want to puke.

“Hey ugly, guess who?”

He looked up. His eyes looked tired, but suddenly flared up into a ready, angry response.

“You fucking bastard,” she murmured, but over the general din, he couldn’t really make out what she was saying. Without saying one word, she took her long nails and laid into his face. Suddenly, they were struggling.

The bouncers, who had just, barely, managed to separate Beth and Mary Ann, now had an additional problem. Somebody had to go and get Gary, and have him call the cops.

Strong young men standing in the crowd made an effort to separate Jill and Bruce, but it was turning into a total circus at Delcinos, and, as short-handed as they were there was little they could do to quiet things down until they got some outside help.

Bruce struggled in the arms of a tall black man who could, easily, have benched him. But a few slick moves, and Bruce turned, around, popped the young man in the face and suddenly, had more than one fight to contend with. People began to slide out of their seats. Some people left, quietly, expecting police. Some people joined in drunkenly. Some just staggered, mug in hand, and wondered, shaking their drunken heads.

The Bartender and an assistant manager named Debra looked out across the floor, and knew from what he could see that it was getting awful damn hairy for as late as it was.

He stopped what he was doing for a moment, turned, told Debra to watch the front, and walked back into the kitchen, Gary had been wiping the same spot for twenty minutes. They had been finished an hour ago, and Keith Decker had already left.

“Hey, Gare, we got a situation brewing out here. Several people fighting.”

Oh shit, great, just what I need, he thought. His boss never liked it when the cops had to be called. Said it made the place look like a dive, and why the hell couldn’t the bouncers deal with it and get any situation under control? That was why he paid them.

Gary took a long, shuddering breath. Nothing, tonight, had been right.

“Okay, get on the phone. Tell them we need them to send an officer down. Hell, tell ‘em we need a whole fucking unit. Ask them if we can get National Guard back-up, while you’re at it.”

Sykes looked at Gary for a minute, as if to say, *Gare, c’mon, man. It’s starting to sound like you hate your job. What is that you’re always saying about being a team player?*”

But he said, “okay.” He pivoted, walked out the kitchen door, and out past the door. Several people on the patio had their noses pressed against the window, trying to see inside. Sykes walked out into the crowd a little. Several intervening friends were busily trying to stand between the various factions, and now Beth Margraves looked as if she had calmed down to the point of just sitting on the floor in a heap crying, holding her bleeding face, while the new bouncer they had just hired still struggled with Mary Ann. It looked like the shit might, finally, be settling down.

Or, he thought, it might be the calm before the storm. And who knew how bad that bitch’s face really was. She had put some napkins to it, and they already looked like a sopping mess of red. He could see that even from here, through the haze and confusion. Shit, she would probably need stitches.

On the far side of the room, several people did their best to hold Jill and Bruce apart, and the black man that Bruce had punched was being cautioned by his fellow frat brothers not to get back out of hand.

But it was the kind of thing that could flare up again at any minute.

He groaned, turned, headed for the stairs, and completely missed the tiny frame of Lindsey Lavender move through the unguarded front door.

Skimmy preceded her, walking off into the crowd, looking up very short skirts, happy as a clam. But Lindsey, upon seeing the noise and confusion, ducked under a table in terror. Way back in the dark, in a puddle of spilt beer. Legs that looked like massive tree trunks seemed to surround her on every side.

Sykes went up to the office, sat down at Gary’s messy desk,

and heaved a tremendous sigh before picking up the phone and speed-dialing the police dept. He would tell them to take their time. Last call was in twenty-minutes, and it looked like it was, actually, calming down and beginning to thin out downstairs. No hurry.

No real emergency.

Darren and Kyle walked easily to the entrance, expecting to have to shoot someone right off the mark. The guns were hidden in the folds of their trench coats, flat against their bodies, and they had spare clips in the pockets. Everything was in readiness.

It was a bonus to find the security force temporarily detained.

Sabrina pulled up along the south-side of the street. She got out, hurried to the kitchen door, and Tanner followed.

Milt waited for a moment, and he and Patricia followed. It was not a question of fear anymore. The feeling was driving them onward. The next few moments happened in a strange, soundless slow-motion that Milt Seebaum would never forget for the rest of his life.

Sabrina opened the door, rushed inside, and Gary, for a moment, didn't know what to say. Was that one of the new waitresses? He started to yell at her as the door to the front swung closed.

Tanner rushed through the backdoor. Gary was still standing stupefied over the sink. At the sight of Tanner, his face went slack with surprise.

"Tanner. You fucking asshole...why are you here? You're fired."

"I know."

Tanner pushed out the kitchen door, nearly ran into the assistant manager, and was greeted with a cry of, "hey watch it buddy." Gary was right behind him, and behind Gary, Milt and Patricia.

The bouncers were busy on the other side of the bar, trying to break up what had escalated into a hair-pulling, eye-scratching evening. The entrance was not being watched.

Suddenly, Tanner saw two distinctive figures enter the bar, one after the other. Instantly, someone cried out:

“Hey, those guys are carrying---”

The staccato sound of gunfire erupted, and it was followed by a chorus of bloodcurdling screams. Tables overturned, beer glasses exploded, the windows shattered outward like curtains of chipped ice. People either ran drunkenly for the farthest exit, or fell to the ground. Outside, several people lay bleeding over patio tables, the party having come to an abrupt end.

People began to stampede each other. Bruce had ducked under a table, with his heart in his teeth, and pulled the body of Jill under the table with him. She was unconscious, bleeding profusely, her hair a mass of red.

Lindsey screamed, her heart pounding in her chest. She started forward out of impulse on her hands and knees. Around her, mammoth legs and flying feet threatened to come down upon her with killing, crushing intensity. Bullets whizzed over her head. She desperately wanted to find her mommy, and couldn't.

Without thinking, Sabrina raised her own gun, fired twice at one of the black clad shapes, and killed Kyle Erickson.

It had been a damn fine shot in the side of his black hair. He seemed to recoil in shock, fly back, and dropped, his gun clattering to the floor halfway beneath his bleeding body. She dove behind the bar as bullets ripped through the wooden counter, decimating it, alcohol flooding out onto the floor from blasted bottles and punctured kegs.

The young man with the clapping hands hat had caught his between the eyes. Blood and brain matter splattered in a torrential spray, soaking Lindsey's white night gown, soaking the floor, soaking everything within reach. The little girl crawled through the sickening grue; kicked, stepped on, ignored. She barely avoided a body dropping on her. Up ahead, the farthest exit had been

blocked by a bottleneck of panicked people in flight. Pandemonium reigned; devils danced in cinders. It was the hour of bloodshed.

Tanner realized that Sabrina and himself were the only ones left cowering behind the bar. Milt and Patricia had ran back into the kitchen when the first shots rang out. Gary was nowhere in sight.

Gary had followed Debra out the kitchen through the back immediately. He ran down the street to a phone booth, but it wasn't necessary. He could already hear the sirens wailing in the distance.

Click, click, click.

Hub?

“What the fuck! What the fuck! Aw shit!”

Suddenly, miraculously, Darren's AK had jammed, and he threw it down angrily. He reached in the waistband of his pants, and pulled out a handgun. Kyle was twitching in a puddle on the floor. Fuck him. This was Darren's time to shine.

He noticed, coming out of his adenoChrome ecstasy for one crystal moment, that the building was now entirely surrounded by flashing lights.

Sabrina stood and fired, having re-loaded from her purse, laying on the floor, with trembling fingers. Simultaneously, Darren ducked, fired, and was hit in the left shoulder. Sabrina jerked backward for a moment, and Tanner, who had tried to crawl back to the kitchen on a floor littered with shards of broken glass and spraying beer, suddenly turned, saw the young woman blown back, blood splattered down from a wound in her chest.

She seemed to fall through space in one beautiful, slow-motion moment made for the movies. Tanner felt time stop on the head of a pin. He also realized he was temporarily deafened.

She lay, as beautiful a creature in death as she was in life. Darren Rawlings had crumpled to both knees, badly wounded. He put his own gun in his mouth.

“Goodbye fuckers.”

It was the final shot. Tanner felt his body jump at that last concussive blast. It was done.

“Freeze!”

Suddenly, several cops were seen to swarm inside, pointing their guns, poised in defensive stances . It was hilarity compounded upon absurdity. Tanner cradled Sabrina in his arms. He noticed, for the first time, that his watch had started working again.

He shook incessantly, not noticing the sun come up. Later, sedated, lying on a stretcher, he began to realize that his life as Tanner Benjamin had been dissolved in only five hours.

He didn't know it then, but Lindsey Lavender had survived. One might wonder, if they hadn't shown up when they did, if Sabrina hadn't killed Kyle Erickson, if one thing in the whole catastrophe had been different, if Lindsey would even be alive today.

But then, with her mother dead, with the mental agony she suffered for years afterward, that fact did not always seem to be a blessing to her.

Seventeen

Tanner had been taken to a psychiatric unit, where he convalesced for approximately two weeks. Then, upon discharge, he was arrested.

Jail had not been the nightmare that he thought it would be. He had a cell all to himself, three hots a day, and was kept in a kind of protective isolation. What the hell, he thought, he had been freaking out for the last seventy-two hours on and off, and nobody wanted to be responsible for a suicide, or something.

He was grilled mercilessly by a homicide detective named

Dan Simmons, but it didn't amount to much. There was no proof, really, that he had been anything but a legitimate hostage through the entire ordeal. After the fifth day, and two interviews without any legal representation whatsoever, he was released without being charged with anything.

"But, stick around, Tanner...we may have to talk again."

Detective Dan had a big, boyish face and just enough of a good build left to him to make him handsome in that mid-forty's manner that all-American plainclothes cops sometimes are. He had very red arms that must have had roughly the tensile strength of iron bands. Tanner was always slightly afraid that Detective Dan was going to whip out a nightstick and clobber the shit out of him. His voice was cultured, slightly-accented Midwest. He sometimes got very loud, unexpectedly.

Dan Simmons had assumed the only thing that he could: that Sabrina Sabrina had been Tanner's girlfriend. Tanner maintained, of course, the truth: that he had not met her before last Saturday night, and that he had plenty of people that could back that up.

The security camera that had taped the whole damn thing had shown, clearly, that Sabrina had done all the shooting. Tanner told them everything that had happened that whole long, miserable night, and even as he related it, his hands shaking, his voice cracking, he could tell that the cops couldn't quite wrap their cop-logic around any of it. It was too improbable a situation. It was something for a novel.

What wasn't improbable was the final death toll: it stood at seven, with seven critically wounded, and that didn't include the three men that Sabrina had gunned down even before the bar massacre in which she, in turn, had been killed by Darren Rawlings. The image of the mass-shooting played on CNN for weeks afterward, and Tanner was fast-becoming a kind of sought-after spectacle. He already had offers from Geraldo Rivera, Oprah, Larry King, and several other talk shows he couldn't even remember. The kicker was when an agent from L.A. called,

seeking to “represent” his media interests. Tanner talked to no one.

It was discovered by certain journalists eager to dig deep into the new national tragedy that “Sabrina Sabrina” had actually been Joy “Joey” Cook, a young woman that had drifted up from Fayetteville, Kentucky with a boyfriend biker. *Newsweek* carried a special about the sordid aspects of her tough, white-trash upbringing: broken home, alcoholic stepfather, mentally-ill mother; acting up in high school, getting busted for theft, finally drifting into prostitution.

It was tragedy kitsch, and it must have made the paperback book market millions. Tanner found himself under siege for nearly two weeks. Damned reporters would catch him on the street, drive by, take photographs.

But he meant to be oblivious to the circus around him, and he largely was.

On the largest scale, the shooting on campus opened up a vein of social self-examination that amounted to pure masochism. Hearings were held in congress, gun lobbyists dug in for a fight, talking heads wondered where the youth was headed in our high-tech world of satanic rock, designer drugs, and violent, instantaneous gratification. Campus groups held one, many candlelight vigils. A few of the dead and injured had been innocent bystanders, one or two were just walking down the opposite side of the street. Tanner had a picture, clipped from *Time*, of all their faces. Sabrina’s face had been re-printed *ad nauseum*, more fabulously beautiful and well-known in death than she had been in her short, bitter existence.

According to the official police investigation, Sabrina had survived the gang rape that had been videotaped by one male present, the murdered Roger Doyle, an ex-con that still had connections to the Outlaw motorcycle gang. It had put her over the edge, psychologically. She was found by a state trooper wandering the highway two days later, in a daze.

She was taken to a hospital, but remained nearly-silent

throughout. A month after, she could be found in a short-term psychiatric care facility, but signed herself out on a false pretence less than two weeks later. Her trail ran cold for a little while.

In that short amount of time she had managed to obtain the gun. She obviously had known something of the habits of some of her attackers, because she managed to track down Roger Doyle, and even guessed that he might be next door with his buddy. The complete timeline for the entire, bloody fiasco was still shaky.

As for Delcinos, it would never open it's doors again. Even after the crime scene was cleared, even after months went by, and the boarded-up windows seemed to hold back the echoing psychic agony of murder, it was still a place stuck in the middle of so much formerly-vibrant life that seemed to be able to suck the joy out of anything. People started talking about curses. The owners, Wiese Enterprises, tried for two years, unsuccessfully, to sell the building. No takers. Too many ghosts.

But eventually, the wounds of a community and an equally-stunned nation did begin to heal. After the funerals played, life started slipping back into an uneasy routine once more.

Tanner had, occasionally (well, really only once) ran into Milt and Patricia. Nether of them had been much more willing to talk, but Milt had grudgingly talked to the local papers, and Patricia had taken the opportunity to publish a book of poetry that supported non-violence and gun control. Patricia had been crippled permanently by a stray bullet after the initial shooting had broken out, and it took all of Milt's strained strength to pull her back through the kitchen and outside, trailing blood behind her. She had suffered considerable shock. They were both in therapy.

They had married only three short months later.

Tanner had ran into him at the coffee bar across the street, where he had seen Milt sitting on a pale, spring morning, looking lonely and gray as ever. Tanner approached him slowly, and came up around the table out front where he was sitting.

“Milt...hi.”

He didn't say anything for a moment, then said, “Hello, Tanner. Have a seat, if you will.”

“Okay...let me just go inside and get me a coffee.” Tanner went through the double glass doors, walked up to the counter, and tried to keep from looking directly into the eyes of the girl running the register.

“I'll just have a short coffee. That's it.”

She knew damn well who he was. Everyone did, now. He handed her a dollar twenty-five, and she gave him a mug. He turned around, filled it to the brim, and walked carefully back outside to the patio.

He sat down opposite from Milt. Seebaum barely registered a perceptible expression.

“So...how is married life treating you?”

He picked up his mug, took a considered sip, and put it back down. He didn't look at Tanner directly, but seemed preoccupied by looking down University Ave. at the traffic.

“Not bad, my boy, all things considered. Patricia has just signed a deal with some New York publisher. The rights to the story. I guess we're going to settle down and get to work on that soon. They offered us...a pretty hefty advance. We're in the market for a new house. How about you?”

“The media has finally taken the hint. I'm not going to try and capitalize on this, Prof. I guess I'm too close to it all right now.”

Milt smiled. He pulled out a small packet of Velvet tobacco, some Zig Zags, and began to roll a very tiny cigarette. Tanner was not surprised to find him a smoker these days.

“You seem surprised. I find it helps to settle the nerves. Ah, I'm too old to worry at this point about my health.”

He lit up, and Tanner could smell a funny undercurrent to the tobacco. He realized it was a very fine, light mixture of regular rolling tobacco and marijuana. Medicinal. Tanner almost grinned.

“You know, Tanner, if you don't feel, particularly, like you

can take advantage of the opportunity...I mean, you are a *writer*, after all. Why not use this? Why not use it as a vehicle? It's a once in a lifetime event. God chose all of us for this tragedy, to experience it together. I mean, it had to have some purpose. Maybe the purpose was for you, err, *all of us*, to write about it."

Milt considered for a moment.

"Do you know a young guy named Lance, err...*something or other*. He survived that night, but his girlfriend with him didn't. She was actually on the faculty. Architecture department, or something. Anyway, his band *Saturn in Retrograde* have just been signed to Atlantic. He's doing a double-album rock opera based on the massacre. *Spin* is already calling him the new Kurt Cobain. Voice of a lost generation. Some sort of media puff job. Oh, he'll make millions, Tanner."

Tanner's mouth dropped open. It was the last absurdity in what amounted to an already bloody fiasco.

"You're kidding. You're not kidding. Well, let him. Fucking Lance always was looking for his big break. I'll have to stop and buy the magazine."

They sat in silence for a moment.

"You know Tanner, if I were you, maybe I would just go ahead and get away for awhile. If I was a young man. Maybe that's why you can't write right now. You need to see the world. Get out from under your present notoriety. It doesn't really suit you, does it my boy?"

Tanner shook his head. Cars and trucks roared by. The clouds started gathering, obscuring the trickling light. People moved casually up and down the sidewalk. But the streets seemed empty today, lifeless. The whole campus area was starting to feel like a prison.

Milt made some more small talk, finished his coffee, picked up a battered old attaché, and told Tanner to take care. He walked away, a tall, gaunt shadow trailing his lean, academic form. His suit was still the same drab gray as always. He looked like the ghost of William S. Burroughs.

Tanner had walked around until dusk, and had settled on going back to his little sleeping room. He had climbed the lonely stairs wearily, unlocked the door, not bothering to turn on the lights, and had plopped down to lay on the bed in silence. That night, he went out to walk again in the darkness, meeting no one.

Loneliness could crush you under it's boot. It took no prisoners. Even when you sat in a crowded room, with eyes crawling over you, you were still, fundamentally, alone. He considered suicide.

No. No, that was not quite right. He had already made the history books, after a fashion. His name would forever be associated with the "U.C.U Campus Killings". If he killed himself now, he would hand himself over to more publicity. He would be the eighth victim of Kyle and Darren. He couldn't have that.

Instead, he would disappear. Quietly. Assumed name, just wander. Like Kerouac. On the road, and out of sight.

Then, when it was time, he would write his book.

Epilog

He had started out just thumbing rides, knowing damn well that it was dangerous. But what did he care now? Everything had stopped making sense a long time ago.

He had hitched with a succession of different people. Some pleasant, some indifferent, some downright scary.

One man, a very dirty-looking old man that doubled as a sort of itinerant, spiritualist minister, took considerable pains explaining the coming of the Antichrist, and the Mark of the Beast.

But the man had been okay. He had even lent him a Bible and a few dollars before dropping him off at a truck stop in the middle of nowhere.

"Go on in there and get yourself something to eat, boy. And may Jesus see you on your way. It was a pleasure to meet you. I'll be praying for you. If you ever get down to Evansville, you

stop by. Me and the missus sometime have company, and I know she won't mind."

Tanner had no idea what to say.

"Thank you," he said tiredly.

He didn't know where he was going to end up tonight, let alone anytime in the distant future. It seemed like he was walking on a wing and a prayer.

The old man started up his car, turned for a minute, waved, and then took off. He didn't even stop to refuel.

That had been strange. Tanner felt a creeping, foreboding sense wash over him. He pivoted, and walked into the truck stop.

It was wall-to-wall rednecks, but the greasy, nourishing food smelled so delicious Tanner could hardly claim to care. It smelled like coffee and cigarettes, hamburgers and plates of french fries. He walked up to the counter, placed his knapsack on the floor and slumped up onto a stool. A waitress walked out of the kitchen, a very pretty girl with short, bobbed hair and not a few freckles. Tall girl, too.

"Hey honey, what can I get you?"

She had a smile as wide as a canyon. Tanner could feel his heart melt a little.

He had fifty dollars.

"I'll have a hamburger with everything, a side of fries, a coke, and a piece of pie."

"Gotcha. Want some coffee too?"

He paused.

"Sure."

He yawned. He looked like a mile of rough road.

"Hey, sounds like you didn't get much sleep last night."

"No. I'm hoofing it, too. So it makes it hard."

He yawned again.

"Really...where ya headed to?"

He looked at her blankly for a moment, unsure of how to respond.

"Evansville."

“Oh. Okay.” She sounded unconvinced, scratched onto her little pad, and walked away to yell at the cook. She got his drinks.

He leaned, sleepily, on one arm. He felt completely disoriented, completely unreal. He had disconnected himself from the matrix of his being. He had voluntarily taken flight. Where was he? Where was he to go from here?

The aimlessness of it all was both exciting and terrifying.

He let his eyes scan the bar, slowly, lowly, taking in the rolling guts, the plaid shirts, the John Deere caps. He pulled a cigarette from his crumpled pack and lit it, absentmindedly.

The waitress put an ashtray in front of him. It was 3.30 p.m. It was Thursday.

He wondered if he would die soon. He could, if he saw fit, just throw himself in front of one of the trucks that roared down the highway. Or just hole up in some corner of the woods, like an old Indian, and wait for death to creep up slowly.

He knew full well there might, in fact, be some sort of psychopath out there with his name written all over a long sleek buck knife. It happened. He knew the risks before he set out. He might hitch a ride and end up a prisoner of some demented pervert. He shivered. The temperature at Haps Truck Stop suddenly seemed to have dropped ten degrees. He scanned the dining room again. Where was the psychopath? It could be anyone. Maybe the next ride he hitched wouldn't be some friendly old preacher. Maybe it would be a Dennis Nilsen, or a John Gacy.

It happened. He knew from experience.

He devoured the food as soon as it was set in front of him, taking it in like it was the last thing standing between him and sudden, instantaneous death.

“Boy, somebody sure was hungry.”

The pretty waitress leaned over the counter. Tanner eyed her suspiciously.

“First time today you've had a bite, isn't it hon?”

She smiled at him again.

“Yeah. I didn't get a chance to eat before I left town.”

“Huh? Well, how about that. Tell ya what, you got a place to stay tonight?”

His mouth dropped open suddenly. He closed it just as quickly, realizing that it was still full of half-chewed food.

“Uh, no, as a matter of fact. In fact, I guess you could say I’m just sort of drifting. Seeing the country.”

She whistled, low. He suddenly saw that she was somewhat older than what he first had thought. Perhaps mid-thirties. But it was hard for him to tell. However old she was, she had kept up very well.

“Well, you look like you could use a good friend. You want a place to stay tonight, um, my place is always open. I mean, are you cool?”

She put the tip of her thumb and forefinger to her lips, and sucked in. The universal sign for pot smoking.

He considered.

“Yeah. I’m cool. I actually just graduated from university. So, I’m not a bum or anything, you know. I just...”

“You just needed to get away for awhile, didn’t you, hon? Well, tell you what,” she turned and looked at the clock, “I get off in ten minutes. Why don’t you just come on over and we can, you know.” And she put her fingers to her lips more gingerly this time.

“Yeah. Okay.”

He felt tense all over. The adventure was starting already.

“So tell me about yourself, boy. Say you look familiar, somehow.”

Tanner evaded her comment. If she realized who he was later, he decided that would be okay. Until then

“Oh, there’s not much to say, really. I come from Union. I just got my English degree from a college...up north. I, uh, I just had a break-up with a girl. I got kind a stressed about it.”

She looked understanding. “Oh, I see. So you just kind of wanted to get away. And you don’t really, have no place to go, huh?”

“Yeah, I have to confess, that’s it.”

They were headed down State Road 18, but she turned off down a country road, drove over a covered bridge of immense age, and headed for a little woods at the edge of a lake. The sun was just starting to dip behind the horizon. Beautiful.

She pulled over onto a little dirt strip amidst a strand of trees and bushes, and pulled out a small clay marijuana pipe.

“Got any kids?”

“No. How about you? You got any?”

She pulled a little baggie of weed from her purse, and a small clay pipe. She packed it with the tip of her finger, produced a lighter, and raised the tip to her lips, sucking the smoke in. She turned to him, nodded, and held up two fingers in the v sign. She had two kids.

“One eighteen, and one sixteen. And both of them with their daddy this week.”

She blew out the pot smoke, her voice raspy. She coughed, a little spastic heck heck sound, and passed him the pipe. He didn’t even like to smoke pot, but he took it and the lighter and took a hit anyway.

He coughed. He didn’t want anymore.

She took a few more hits, looked at the end, decided that she would try once more, and then decided it was “cashed”.

She felt good. They both sat there in utter silence for a moment, watching the sun fade behind the water. The view was exquisite and lovely.

“So, Tom.”

“Yeah...”

He suddenly realized he couldn’t remember her name.

“Pam. Pamela Jane. You can call me P.J. All my friends call me P.J.”

“Okay, P.J. I like that. It’s cute.”

He suddenly found that his heart was hammering in his chest.

“Um, don’t take this the wrong way but, *you do like girls, don’t*

you?

"If you mean, am I gay? No. Not at all."

She smiled, apologetic. And then she started laughing. He could tell by the two red pin points of her eyes that the weed was taking effect.

"I'm sorry baby, but I had to ask! I mean, you strike me as being kinda *different* from the guys that usually come into the truck stop. And you said you went to college."

"No, I'm as straight as they come P.J. Believe me. I almost lost my life over a girl, once."

"Oh, really. Wow. What happened?"

Pause.

"She was killed... It's a long story."

"Oh I am so sorry sugar, well, that's okay if you don't want to tell me."

They sat in silence for a few more moments. She produced some cigarettes, and they each lit up.

Smoke. Murmur. Tension.

"It's really beautiful out here this evening."

"Yeah, I come out here sometimes after work and smoke up. Just to watch the sunset over the water. You know, I think I saw one of the, what ya call them?" She started to shake her hand, grasping for the expression, "UFOs---that's it---I saw one of them out here one time. I was sitting here, and this great big thing just appears, and starts hovering over the water. It had all these lights on it. It just stopped there, in the air. Scared the hell out of me. You believe in UFOs, Tom?"

He shook his head no. He was a firm believer, actually.

"I mean, I believe that there could be something, out there. Has to be. The universe is endless."

"You know, I think I heard someone on the *Discovery Channel* say that once. You like TV? What's your favorite show?"

"*Northern Exposure*."

She looked at him quizzically.

"Northern Exposure...I don't think I've ever seen that

one. Oh, wait a minute. Was that that show from way back in the nineties where they're all, like, living in Alaska, and everybody's all kooky and shit?"

"Yep. That's my favorite show. They use to rerun it on A&E, but they stopped. I haven't seen it in years. My favorite character was Ed Chigliak. He was this native Alaskan kid that was in training to be a *shaman*."

She looked at him, blankly.

"A what?"

"A shaman is like an Indian priest. A healer. The shaman goes down to the spirit world if the tribe has a problem. He asks the assistance of the Great White Spirit on behalf of his tribe."

Pause.

"Oh, well. I didn't really watch that show that much."

Silence.

"You, uh, do live alone, don't you?"

"No. Oh, I mean, I live with my brother right now, I mean. But he drives a truck. He won't be back for awhile. I'm not married. Separated."

It sounded like lies. But he didn't question her. And, as they lay out on an old blanket amidst the long grass, making love underneath the stars, not even a legion of mosquitoes managed to dampen his ardor any.

Later, they went back to her house, and she fixed him a *Hungry Man* TV Dinner.

Her house was rather old, cluttered. Unkempt. There were TV dinner trays lying on the kitchen counter with cigarettes stubbed in them. There were cheap pictures bought at thrift stores. There was the regulation tattered couch. Of course, there were no books.

But he didn't care. Just as long as the "brother" didn't show up unexpectedly.

The glare from the TV threw blue light onto the rumpled bed. It was an old re-run of *Sanford and Son*.

“Hello Elizabeth, I’m coming to join you honey!”

P.J. did her Red Foxx impersonation. It made him giggle. They had drank some beer, and smoked some more grass, and made love again. She was a peach, he decided, even if she was a rather intellectually-dull peach. And besides, he wasn’t going to curse his luck at this point. His first official day as a vagrant, and he was laying in a nice soft bed with a full stomach, with an attractive older woman.

Yep. Sometimes God even smiled on him.

He slipped out the next morning, before she even awoke. At first, he had planned to stay a few days, play it by ear. See how things went. But, as he rose before dawn, with a nasty headache, he had wandered out onto the porch to see the sun come up. For some strange reason, he had taken the bible that the preacher that had given him a lift gave to him. He hadn’t even opened it yet.

On the inside cover, written in large, sloppy handwriting, it gave the address of the Reverend Fred Keane, as well as a phone number, and, below that, the words, *it is well, it is well, with my soul.*

The birds had begun to chirp, and the sky took on the light blue gaze that heralded the dawn of a new day. Those words began to wring in his awakening mind.

The “house” was, in actuality, a trailer, situated in a dismal little trailer court right off the highway.

It is well, it is well, with my soul.

From where he stood, peaking just over the horizon, he could see the magnificent glory of the celestial bringer of light and warmth begin it’s journey upward once more, never-ceasing to be the reason that life could continue to crawl, to thrive, to breathe.

He inhaled. Even in a dismal little trailer park, the fresh air of the morning smelled delicious. It made him want to flee. It made him want to run. It made him dream again, that sunrise.

It is well.

With my soul.

The words seemed to take on huge, mantra-like significance

in his mind. He was having a moment of supreme illumination. He went inside, put on his jeans and shirt, picked up his knap sack, and turned, and looked at the long sleek legs and the beautiful breasts of the sleeping figure on the rumpled bed.

He crept into the kitchen, obtained, out of the mess in the drawers, a pen, and scratched out a note. He thanked her for the TV dinner, and for keeping him for the night. He also left the forwarding address and the phone number of Reverend Keane. If she wanted to, she could catch up with him. But, he knew if he stayed, he would outlive his welcome, again.

He walked out of the disordered, dirty trailer, closed the door softly, stepped out into the morning, and walked up to the road. Not many cars at 5: 30 in the morning. Oh well, his thumb would help him out later. He started walking.

Tanner Benjamin bumped and bounced in the back of the rickety old truck, not exactly sure where he was going, but sure of which way he was headed. Around him, America spread her amber legs in exaltation, and the world seemed like it might go on surviving forever.

Bounce. Bump. Vroom!

In the cab up front, a very large farm boy named Dub sped down the highway with every intention of taking Tanner as far as the open road would go. Or until he got to the next town. Whichever came first.

War still raged in Iraq. The daily news still gave off it's reports of increased terrorist alerts, and the development of the human species as a paranoid, confined creature, a victim of it's own will to power, continued unabated. Evil still made sure that microchips were implanted under human skin, fanatics in far-off desert countries still plotted and schemed, and drugs were still injected in the waiting veins of those people unlucky enough to find themselves caught on the end of a physiological teat, choking out their last bits of life in the gray, swirling dawns of so many

cities that had replaced cloud cover with smog.

In institutions, they still indoctrinated. In churches, they still prayed.

In supermarkets, they still shopped. On battlefields they still killed. *It is well*, he thought, *with my soul*.

The roads blew by. The tall grasses waved in the cool, sweeping wind. Behind him, he was leaving an expanse of country that had reared generations of noble, ragged young men to rise up, claim the torch of their forebears, and carry on.

Tonight, alone for the first time in an absolute, complete way, Tanner Benjamin would sleep under an expanse of stars that never ended. He knew that somewhere out there was the God force that had breathed the entire epic of humanity into motion. Did that God still care?

It is well, he thought.

Now he was going to live. Now he was free, really, for the first time in years. Free to experience life in an entirely new way. Free to sleep out under the stars and planets. Free to visit the temple of himself in his own time.

It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Would he ever find the answer he was looking for? Was life, truly, as brutal, as random and senseless and terrifying as what he had learned in the past month of living? After seeing the death, and brutality, and carnage he had seen, how did one cope? How did one manage to go on, surrounded by life, with a knowledge of such horror?

He didn't know. Some things still didn't make much sense. It would take a lot of time to figure things out.

He smiled. Inwardly. He smiled at the great expanse of the world and the opportunities for living that he knew he still had. Time. He had survived. He had grown. He knew what life was now.

He had time.

It is well, it is well, with my soul...

The old Baptist hymn kept flitting in his mind, as he sat

there in the back of the truck, knowing no pain, knowing no more of anything else except the limitless glee of eternal hope.

It was well, you see. All of it.

Tanner Benjamin had found his soul.

And all that cal.

Afterword

The nineties were a shocking, difficult era to grow up in. It went in with the horror of the L.A. riots, went out with the mass-murder at Columbine, and had sandwiched between it such wondrous historical moments as the first Gulf War, the massacre of the Branch Davidians at Waco, Texas, and the terrorist attack that destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, costing the life of hundreds of innocent people.

It was the decade when on-line became a reality, paranoia made television shows like the *X-Files* extremely successful, and the N.R.A. did all they could to ensure that everyone would continue to have the right to bear arms, paranoid or otherwise.

The national media circus centered around alternate spectacles of the self-inflicted shotgun death of *Nirvana* lead-singer Kurt Cobain, the murder of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman, the mass-suicide of the UFO-oriented religious group Heaven's Gate, the vileness of performance artist *cum* tabloid Satanist Marilyn Manson (real name Brian Warner), and the cultural raspberry of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. All things considered, Slick Willy and his chubby mistress may have been one of the funniest side-shows going that whole long decade.

The strange eddies and currents also swept in the corpulent, yelling-from-the-ballpark-bleachers political conservative Rush, the talk-show sleaze of Jerry Springer, Howard Stern (and variations between Jerry Springer and Howard Stern), the legitimization of pornography, and macabre obsession with

such fine upstanding citizens as cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer, castrator Lorena Bobbitt, and “Unabomber” Theodore Kazcynski.

Gang life became dramatized and glorified with “gangster rap”, heavy metal musicians now openly espoused murder, necrophilia, and suicide, drive-by shootings became commonplace even in small cities, and metal detectors went up in the high schools.

As I stated, it was a highly-charged decade, for a lot of reasons.

Sabrina, Sabrina is a satire of certain cultural trends. I hope, someday, it may seem as far-fetched as science fiction, but, listening to the latest newscasts about high-level terrorist alerts, political corruption in high places, environmental disaster, cultural breakdown, religious apostasy, church scandals involving hundreds of pedophile priests, and the backlash against free speech in one, many forms, I fear it will not be so.

Milestones in my outlook on society as a young man included the acquittal of a celebrity that was obviously guilty of murder, seeing my father go off to “liberate” Kuwait and knowing there was a chance he may never come back (he did, thankfully), realizing that no matter how hard I busted my ass working for minimum wage I was never going to get ahead financially, coming to the conclusion that college was simply another permutation of high school, and watching cameras crawl through the hallways of Rancho Santa Fe, broadcasting silent bodies in black Nike running shoes.

I remember that particular image well. I remember thinking that those people were crazy. They had all had so much faith that the UFO was coming, that they had decided to take the final plunge into death, no holds barred.

But now I wonder:

How crazy were they?

Is it crazy to want to escape such a world?

The last great milestone, the terrorist attack on September

11th, 2001, actually put the final feather in my misanthropic cap. It was the last brushstroke, so to speak. I knew then that nothing made sense anymore, and that whatever I had been led to believe for so many years about life was nothing more than a sad illusion. The world could end. Life could be shattered, violently, from out of the blue. And nothing was what it seemed, anymore.

That day will live in infamy, in my mind. But I can't let myself dwell on the image of the collapsing towers, or I will collapse. Because the world is not our friend. And it could be.

We have stepped out onto the surface of the Moon, put rovers on Mars, cured diseases thought unconquerable, and have secured the resources of a vast, living, electronic brain called the World Wide Web, which makes communication instantaneous for everyone. This should be the Utopian Era: a world of scientific achievement and technological mastery that promises to usher in the Reign of Prosperity. Instead, it's raining blood around the world.

R. Buckminster Fuller, the brilliant scientist and polymath, declared that with the present design technologies we should be able to secure abundance and plenty for all. End of story. And I believe him.

Bucky died in 1983. It's a damn good thing he didn't live to see the turn of the century.

It would have killed him.

Dark Wave

Prolog

For some reason she could not yet divine, she was in Muncie, Indiana, where she had once visited a friend of hers recently enrolled as a freshman at Ball State University. But it was not the same campus she remembered; the buildings looked as if they had been erected by a psychopath, instead of an architect.

There was a great hump along University, for one thing; the street looked like a giant worm lived beneath it, and had frozen in a petrified state right in the midst of arching its back. She beat her feet along the pavement, although she could not now quite tell if she was walking the sidewalk, a boardwalk, or in the gutter.

She passed what appeared to be an old-fashioned bakery window. But she thought, perhaps, that this might really be the coffee shop she had frequented during her weekend-long visits. She went in, was caught by the heavy aroma of steeping cappuccino and freshly-toasted bagels. The lighting was very strange today; it seemed like the fluorescents were giving off the soft amber glow of candles. To her right, in the dining room, a small group of faces that looked familiar clustered in one corner, talking amongst themselves.

She wanted to join them, but she was too young, she surmised; still a high school girl, she didn't feel comfortable around the big fishes at the College. She wondered what her own college experience would be like, when she finally got here, but instead she approached the counter, and looked at the woman working.

Hmm. Tall. Bobbed black hair. Pierced face.

She had a rainbow tattoo of an ankh around her wrist. Probably a lesbian.

"Can I help you?"

"Yeah. I'll have one of those....*whatchamacalit?*...A venti mocha latte with soy milk and the foam still on. Raspberry flavored, too."

"Um, okay, heh. That will be two eighty-five, okay. Thank you."

The woman rang up the register, and she handed her a twenty. The woman handed her her change, and she smiled as she caught an eyeful of the woman. Nice body--very shapely, and she obviously kept herself exercised and conditioned.

Then, as if embarrassed by her own thoughts, she stifled them, and went to sit down at the farthest table. Suddenly, she saw

a tall old man enter at the door to her left. He was wearing a somber, dark suit, an old straw hat, and carrying a briefcase. In one hand, he held his mug of coffee, and in between his withered old lips perched one hand-rolled cigarette. He sat down across from her, heaved a sigh, and said, "Good to see you again, Cin. It's been a while."

She looked at him quizzically; he did seem familiar, but right now, she couldn't quite place him. All she could tell, for sure, was that he seemed like he might be a composite of several different persons she had met, at one time or another.

"I-I don't think we've..." she trailed, off, hoping she didn't seem rude.

"Oh yes we have. Everybody knows me, deep down in there soul. It's an undeniable fact of earthly existence. Tell me: do you have any inkling about what is going to happen to you, and very soon?"

She looked at him now with a growing sense of apprehension. Who was this old man, with the straggling white hair, and the piercing black eyes. They were so sharp they looked like twin jets of black flame burning in the center of his withered, white face.

"Some call me Galls. On a small planet in the middle of the Andromeda system, I am known as *Cheebar*, or something akin to it. I am known by various other names in various other places and times. But here, you can just call me Galls. Mr. Galls."

She looked at him a moment, before getting up. But, suddenly, it was as if the ass of her jeans had become glued to this very spot.

"Hey...Hey, what the hell is going on here?"

"Don't you want to chat with me? Don't you want to find out everything before it happens? You can, you know...Everything is predestined to the fourthorfifth degree...All the big things. The 'ending things'...You may have, oh a certain amount of leeway in the small stuff. But everything else, well, just goes according to plan."

“What? Whose plan? What the hell are you talking about?”

But she was really curious now. She liked the way the old buzzard pulled out a skinny pouch of tobacco, rolled his cigarette in one gnarled hand, and then popped it lightly into the corner of his withered old lips. It reminded her, somehow, of her grandfather Lloyd, who would die, eventually, of pancreatic cancer.

Also, as she looked at him, she could swear he was getting younger.

In the corner, two women were busily folding papers at a table, drinking their last sips of coffee, and getting up. They looked professional; short, discreet skirts, athletic builds, and wonderful haircuts. They seemed to fade into the background and for some reason she lost sight of them.

She turned back and looked into the piercing eyes of her strange companion.

“What you say is always true, isn’t it?”

He looked grim for a moment, said “I am afraid so.”

“But--anything you tell me, well...I’m either not going to understand, or I’m not going to remember it when it becomes really important. That’s about the way of things, isn’t it.”

He smiled.

“You catch on quickly. Oh the young are so gifted these days; so quick. I think it has something to do with the influence of *Sesame Street*. But come, it’s time we got going.”

She couldn’t remember getting up, but now they were walking around outside in the sunshine. Galls walked very slowly, but she was lost a bit herself, and he had no trouble keeping up to her.

A girl in very tight shorts roller bladed past, her hair bouncing in thick strands around her sweating shoulders. Cinder was amazed at how the scenery was laid out; it was as if the topography had become corrupted by a superimposition of whatever it had been like a hundred years past. Ancient buildings kept company to modern ones, crumbling houses stood atop

massive hills next to well-designed, cubicle prefab office blocks. It was an architectural monstrosity beyond the imaginings of the most-heated surrealist.

He talked and talked, his voice a strange counterpoint to her own random, intrigued imaginings. She had no idea of what he spoke, catching only memorable choruses of the strange, cosmic poetry he murmured in his inimitable, rusty monotone.

"The world is a matrix of happenings, and all of them are glory. Glory unto the Father, and we call that *love*. Glory unto the Son, and that's what we call *forgiveness*. Glory, glory, glory; *everything* is glory; everything is *perfect* and *good*. Just remember that, kiddo. Remember, when things seem like they are at their darkest, well, there's always an awakening after the nightmare. And that's when you can look at yourself in the mirror, and see yourself for who you really are. Time? What the hell is time? It's nothing. Not even death is such a cold, merciless task-master. Love has them all whipped. And, in the end, even death may die..."

There was so much she wanted to ask him, knowing full-well that whatever answer this wise sage gave would seem as meaningless as gibberish later, when she strained her mind to remember why it had all seemed so important. She wished, for a moment, that she could write it all down; but she knew she could find a piece of paper here about as easily as she could find an honest man in Washington.

Suddenly, they were walking, slowly, through a wide thoroughfare, that was brooded over, on one side, by an immense red and gray building that seemed as if it might be on the high side of a hundred and fifty years old.

"Mr. Galls, where do you come from? How is it that you know so much? Like my name. How did you know my name?"

She was suddenly embarrassed by her ignorance, but he stopped for a moment, and continued shuffling forward, his cane beating a tattoo against the pavement.

"It is my business to know all things and all times, at all places, in all situations, and in any event. I am simply an avatar,

child--if you don't know what that means, you can look it up later, but I doubt you'll remember. Right now, I am, I suppose, acting in my capacity as a 'psycho pomp'. There's another word you young folks --oh, but bless me! You really aren't so young, not really, you just don't remember the several hundred years prior to your present consciousness-stream--are probably not too familiar with. Again, I don't expect you to remember it. Ah, just do one thing for Mr. Galls, Cinder. Just one little favor."

She stopped, and he turned, suddenly, and now he seemed all of a sudden, every bit as old as when she had first encountered him; maybe even more so.

"What?" There was a moment when she met his gaze, that she found the light in his eyes to be, truly, terrifying.

"Just remember: No matter what happens, you are still a child of God, *Princess*."

And suddenly she gasped, and drew back. For a moment, the seemingly-shifting face of Galls had seemed to settle into a face that she knew only-too-well as the face of her father.

Then the illusion passed, and she heard the squealing of tires in the distance.

Galls turned, looked as a sleek, black vehicle suddenly emerged from down the street, and said, "Well, well...My part is finished for now. Good luck. You'll need it."

Cinder looked at him quizzically, and then turned to the curb, approaching the care, slowly. There were, it seemed, several teenagers filling the front and back seat. They each looked slightly familiar, as if they were people that she had been in class with, at some point. The driver was a lanky, bodacious-looking blond athlete-type, with a square jaw, blue eyes, and blond hair.

He leaned out the driver's side window, and yelled, "Hey beautiful! Want to go for a spin?"

She looked in the car.

"How? Dude, there isn't any room."

The teenagers in the car started laughing as if they all shared the same secret, and she heard a few smart-ass comments

from a young, thin boy with dirty brown hair that she thought was a local skateboard kid. Blond Boy said, with a cheery voice, “Just hop on up and sit on the roof. Just sit facing the back window, so your legs don’t get in the way of my vision.”

She turned, perplexed, and looked for Galls, but he was already gone.

Amazingly, without even giving it a second thought, she jumped aboard the car, and let it vroom off into the distance watching the pavement flash past her in a blur. She knew she was in no danger of falling off the back end, and rested her feet on the rear bumper. Finally, she just let them dangle in the wind.

It seemed like finally they had reached their destination. She had put her head down for a moment, become lost in thought, and had fell gradually asleep, where she had had a terrific dream that she was at the vast center of a web of many strands, and flowing, like some visceral electricity through each silky wire, was pure, atomized knowledge. She was be-decked with jewels in this dream, and floating in some cosmic space, beyond the reaches of time.

Finally, she looked up from her reverie, and espied the largest hill at the side of the street, that she believed she had ever seen in her life. Rolling upward like a terrific, preternatural mound, it looked nearly like a mountain. She got off the top of the trunk-lid, and looked up and down the street, dazzled, momentarily, by the weird way in which a perfectly normal, suburban street seemed to flanked, on either side, by enormous, though well-cared for small hills of carefully-clipped lawn.

A few of the teenagers must have gotten out of the car at this point, but she could not specifically tell if they were the same ones who were occupying it when their short drive had begun. She saw several giggling kids run directly up the side of the steep hill, and she knew, oddly enough, that this was impossible, as the very steepness of it would have required them to bend over and pull up handfuls of earth as they went. But she called out to them, and followed.

Up she ran, and now she understood that her feet were floating; or, perhaps, it was that, at this particular angle of time and space, the immense hill was in actuality, level, and the house and the rest of the world had tipped over and was in danger of falling off into the sun. She could think more about it later, but right now, everything had grown dark, as the sky above began to become clouded.

She ascended the the rickety, caving-in porch, and opened the door, not-liking the squeal of rusted hinges and the clatter of old wood. But she quickly forgot this, and found herself walking a series of dim hallways, alone.

The tilted and twisted, and clattered with loose boards. She thought, in her confusion, for a brief moment, that she had been deluded into entering an amusement park “fun house”.

She walked into the deep darkness of the recesses of the place, careful, at several points, to step over a few streams of flowing water that seemed to intersect the halls; at one point she looked down into the weirdly luminescent murk, and swore that she saw fish twisting in the current.

But this place was obviously not lived-in; couldn't be lived in, as it seemed like it was only half-finished in parts. Other areas of the house looked brand new; still other sections looked as if they had weathered the storms of time poorly.

She walked through one door, and was amazed to find herself, for a few moments, in some fashion of modern-looking library. Was it her school library? Perhaps, but they must have really done some acute remodeling in the last few days.

A very nasty-looking abstraction called Mrs. Ipswich was leaning over her desk, perusing the contents of a crumbling book. Suddenly, she looked up at Cinder, her horned-rimmed glasses perched atop a face that was rivulets of hanging flab.

The teeth were gaping, rotten stumps.

“Could you please stop making that racket, Miss? This is a library, for God's sake!”

The woman hissed. Cinder started to protest, but then,

thinking better of it, turned and merely walked down another aisle, quickly leaving the repellent woman behind in the mists of her vision. She liked the light in this place; it had a cool, natural, re-assuring quality.

Soon, she found herself, unaccountably, lost again in the dark maze of passages.

Her hands trailed the walls, all was darkness here. The hallways slanted at odd, non-Euclidian angles in certain spots. In one dark recess, a sort of bizarre, makeshift alcove, she found what she could only surmise, was an ancient gas stove.

She picked up and moved on. In time, she came to another staircase; a horrible, clapboard style structure that seemed to wobble beneath her feet as she climbed. As she ascended, she saw that it proceeded it landed at a floor whose next flight of stairs was a cobwebbed choked banister of incalculable age. She went upward slowly, into the gloom, not liking the squeal of loose boards beneath her feet.

She came to a door that opened up into an ancient-looking room; certainly well over a hundred years old. A sort of misty, fuzzy sunlight streamed through the tattered silk curtains. The entire room was fuzzy sunlight fading into gloom.

She knelt down at a low, rusted iron table; it had wonderful, ornate work engraved in it; weird scrolling images and strange ripples; it's legs were baroque animal legs. Upon the table rested a massive book. Suddenly, she found herself thumbing through the book. The pages seemed to have a slick, living, animal vitality to them. It was as if they began to jump through her fingers too quickly, turning themselves.

Strange diagrams, and bizarre, scrawling works of art swept past her vision. Suddenly, she felt a sense of presence, of *other*, begin to invade this place, as if the room were simply the mouth of some camouflaged being that was drawing her in with an invisible, lolling tongue.

She picked up the book, holding the large, dusty volume securely under one arm. She would peruse it's strange contents

later. She ran from the room, not liking the choking, suffocating stillness of it; not liking the sense of age here, that felt as palpably real as a dried, withered skin.

She went back out into the dark maze of corridors, still holding the book, making her way through alternating pools of shadow and dirty, dusty shafts of light, until she found herself drawn to a room at the end of a long hall, that seemed to disappear down into total darkness.

She went slowly, going toward the reddish, sunset mist that played out from the edges beneath the last door on the left. She walked toward that light, put her hand out on the little brass knob, and found the door pushed open easily.

The room inside looked as if it had been added to the house as an afterthought; it seemed to have been hammered together from old boards, poorly, with huge gaps from which streamed a new, reddish glare; a desert sheen, at sunset; a strange, angry red atmospheric light that seemed suffused with twirling, bitter sand.

The light in this room was nearly rose colored; before her, a large, slab-like table had, resting upon its surface, a body that was, quite clearly dead. She walked forward slowly, feeling the tendrils of terror begin to lick the back of her neck.

The body was, partially covered by a thin white sheet, but looked as if it had slipped off. It was clearly a man, she noted; a massive erection sprouted beneath the sheet. The muscles were well-defined; the body was stout, pale, and nicely proportioned.

The face was a miserable hole, looking as if it had been cleaved like moist clay with a trowel; it literally caved in above the mouth, although this indentation might have been a congenital deformity. She could not tell.

Suddenly, she became aware of a slow grinding, or pulling, and a clanking as if some powerful motor had been turned on beneath her feet. Outside the clapboard wall the wind suddenly picked up and began howling, as dust began to pour in from between the cracks.

She could feel the floorboards beneath her start to vibrate.

Instantly, the body shot upward, with a bizarre, unwinding sound like chain rattling through a pipe , and with the unmistakable release of what seemed a massive spring.

It flailed for a moment, and Cinder shot away from it. She could hear a sort of thick, rasping erupt from it's throat, as it's jaw worked uselessly. She could barely make out it's words, as it hissed, "Cinder!"

Then, as if the mechanism wound down, it dropped back limply into place. She approached the table again, curiosity overcoming her fear momentarily.

She crept toward the table, looking into the dead eyes of the mechanized cadaver.

She felt a vice-grip around her throat, and barely heard the rattling and springing sound as she stared down the horrid, waxen whiteness of the arm, as the cadaver held her in a strangling grip.

She struggled, trying to pry the dead clutches from her neck.

The wind outside leapt to wild fury, and the sky became as blood.

Part 1: 1988

Chapter 1

She picked at the scab on her lip. It was infected, she knew, but what the hell. Her life was infected, as far as she was concerned, and she did not know what she could do about it. Since they had come to Indiana, nothing had been right, Bobby had not gotten better, and Dad was mostly always in a bad mood anymore. Oh well, that was the way the cookie crumbled.

She sat up in bed, looking at the trickle of milk-white light filter through the shades. It was funny, she thought, nobody really considered what death was like. On the other hand, did they ever wonder why they were even here to begin with? What was life supposed to be?

She tried to turn over and go back to sleep, but she found that it was impossible. Sleep would not come, no matter what she did, and so instead she rolled back over onto her back and tried to create a dream world in which there was no pain, no loneliness, no stepmother. No nagging sense of guilt. No pain.

She brought a finger up to her mouth, and began to suck it sensually. In her world, there were no puny men, no little dorks lusting after her, building their own imaginary kingdoms in her wake. *Drooling little ogres*, she thought disgustedly.

She imagined the perfect form of the perfect man: big, hulking, with massive muscles and an even more massive erection. She thought about what it must be like for such a man to take you in his arms, hold you there, caress you, then lay you down on the bed, and slip his manhood between your legs.

She put her damp fingers into her crotch. She was beginning to lose herself in the purity of her erotic vision. She worked her flesh, letting each dip and shiver of excitement play over her body in the darkness. Her breathing became ragged.

After a few moments though, she lost the impetus of her lust. Her entire world began to fall flat with the coming of the sunrise, and she lay back, frustrated, upon her pillow. She felt like a stubbed-out cigarette.

Why? She wondered, angrily, why couldn't life be as fulfilling as a fantasy?

It was this final thought that followed her back through the darkened halls of sleep, where she seemed to be moving through a labyrinth of hallways that had no end.

She could hear murmurs and wild laughter erupting from darkened corners, and echoing like gunshots in the blackness. But this was just a dream she thought madly. This was only a bad

dream.

Breakfast had been slowly crunched: bacon and over-brown toast with a heavy dollop of butter on it. Julia, as per usual, scolded her on her liberal use of butter.

“Now, Cinder, you know how much you always tell me you are worried about your weight. Butter is nothing but creamy fat.”

“I know, I know. But I need something to be happy about today, don’t I?”

“Oh you! You are always so gloomy...Now, we are going to have a wonderful day today. As a family. If you can’t be happy about it yourself, please try to at least be happy about it for your father, Cin. He’s very anxious to get Bobby to this new school. They--they might really be able to *help* him, there.”

“I know,” she said sadly. She would miss her brother --her poor, *disabled* brother. That was the nice word, she thought. That was the word the other kids at school never used. Well fuck them. He was her brother alright. Whether he was retarded or not.

Suddenly, from some corner of her mind she was unfamiliar with, a stab of guilty memory seemed to jump up from the base of her brain. She felt a shiver of disgust roil in her stomach, and dropped her toast back onto the plate. Upstairs she could hear her father singing in the shower, and she knew he and Julia would soon be rousing Bobby, and getting him into his braces, and leading him down the stairs and out into the car, to take him to the “special school”.

To get rid of him for awhile, because, he’s such a pain to take care of, she thought, bitterly. Yes. Maybe that’s why she felt so much guilt today. After all, Bobby wouldn’t even be in the shape he was today if it hadn’t been for--

She brushed this thought from her mind, stood, yawned, pushed her chair in, looked at Julia, sitting there, sipping coffee, smoking a cigarette, and then frowned, turned, went to the staircase, and began to ascend slowly. On the way up, she had a vision of strangling Julia and burning her eyes out with her own

cigarettes.

She stripped off her clothes slowly and looked in the full-length mirror in her bedroom. On the far right corner she could see exactly one forth of John Lennon's face reflected from a poster on the wall behind her. It was now quite bright in the bedroom, despite the gloomy winter weather, and she refused to turn on the lights so early in the morning; it always gave her a headache.

She was too fat, she decided, but didn't know what she could do about it right now, today, standing here like a fool. So the boys all thought she was a cow, big deal. Maybe she would become a lesbian, get her nipples pierced, and a tattoo of Betty Page on her forearm. Did she like other girls that way? She sometimes wondered if she might not be able too.

Boys were such boneheads. Especially the ones she liked.

She walked, stark naked, into the hall, not caring a whit if her family happened to catch a glimpse of her naked or not.

She hopped into the shower, lathered herself up good, began to sing to herself quietly. She was becoming a woman, she decided. Maybe things would work out after all.

She stayed in the shower was too long, just enjoying the warm goodness of it, letting it wash over her form and take the care and residue of last nights dreaming away like a layer of scum that had to be peeled away to swirl down the drain.

She thought, for just a moment, about the strange dream: the eerie hallways; the labyrinth that seemed to stretch out into infinitude and allow no real light to penetrate from inside the depths of its walls. She could see, for a moment, a hated, hunched figure that seemed to lurk deep within the blackness around her. A filthy, bald character with dirty, ripped clothing, and a terrible rotten mouth. Had it jumped out at her in the dream? She couldn't remember.

She thought she had read somewhere that, in dreams, we sometimes remembered what we wanted to remember, or even

added to the dream after we had awoken, and that this explained, somehow, how people managed to have dreams that--seemingly--came true.

Yes, but what about those people who write their dreams down beforehand, and then have those same dreams come true? How do you explain that, Mr. Expert Rationalist?

She smiled to herself bitterly. Her science teacher, Mr. Blue, was always laying on the students how everything could be explained rationally, scientifically, *people*.

“People, Let me tell you. Education and a rational outlook on life are the keys to successful living. People, all of this wacky psuedo-scientific nonsense you see on television--People, just ignore it. It isn’t worth a hoot. People, we didn’t land on the moon based on the predictions of astrologers and psychics...”

...And on and on. It was rumored that, when other teachers were retiring in the lounge for their coffee breaks, Mr. Blue was frequently seen in the student library, pouring over the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Cinder realized Mr. Blue had probably never lost his virginity.

She exited the bathroom, still dripping, and walked across the hall stark naked to her bedroom. She slammed the door a little too hard, heard Julia’s voice drift up in consternation from downstairs, and felt some sense of herself well up from her heart and paint the day a little rosier. She went to her closet, pulled the door open, stood, for a confused moment, looking at her plethora of dresses, most of them salvaged with care from the Salvation Army and various thrift stores (Julia was always chiding her for wearing the old things when her father made good money, and could afford new dresses for her. She didn’t know how to explain to Julia what “cool” was, and wouldn’t have even if she could.), and selected, finally, her favorite pair of patched jeans, and an old-fashioned flowered top.

She decided looking simple was the best alternative today. Hell, she wouldn’t even wear her earrings. Only some bracelets and some perfume that, she knew, smelled like burning leaves. She

fussed with her hair a moment, and then simply mussed it. She hurriedly put on some lipstick. There.

She reached into her drawer and pulled out a pack of clove cigarettes. Julia had almost had a coronary when she found out that Cinder smoked., but she was eighteen now, and could do what she wanted. Besides, Julia didn't have any damn room to lecture, as far as smoking.

She lit the skinny smoke, sucked it into her lungs, and liked the sweet, intoxicating flavor as it filled her mouth. Her head swam pleasantly for a moment.

She had smoked marijuana a few times, but she had never, really, liked it as much as sitting smoking a clove, lost in thought.

She examined herself in the mirror. She was pretty in that unconventional, "geek girl" way that some more sophisticated boys liked. Political guys. Punk rock boys.

"Latent homos," she sighed. She went to her CD player, pressed one of the top buttons, hoping it was the right disc. Suddenly, she heard the voice of Joey Ramone telling an audience in Brazil that some of *us here tonight, y'know, still fuckin' remembuh*.

"Rock n' Roll Radio", she said to herself, and then heard Julia, downstairs, screech in a quivering voice to turn her music down.

"Please Cin, could you please turn that...*stuff*, down?"

"Aw fuck you Julia," Cinder said to herself, but she complied. She knew, even with the door shut, she had turned the volume up way too high for seven thirty-five in the morning.

Bill Rockwell was putting on his belt, combing his hair, shaving, dashing on cologne, shining his shoes, and cleaning out his briefcase--all, seemingly, at once. Hell, he hadn't slept well the night before, so if he was a little rattled, it was probably understandable. Today, he was driving his entire family to Ohio, to the Saint Thomas Aquinas School for Special Children. He had talked to the director personally, had been assured, in professional, yet caring tones, that they had just the kind of program a child like Bobby needed. That they were an "expert facility"; that they

could help him overcome the mental handicap that had resulted from the unfortunate accident that Bobby had had as a child. The accident that had claimed the life of his first wife, Jill. He would leave Bobby there for almost ten months. Of course, he would get up there as much as he could to see him, he assured himself. He was a good man.

Jill had been gone for eight hard years now, and he had, finally, remarried. It had been time, and Julia had been waiting in the wings, an angel; as caring and beautiful a woman as he had ever laid eyes on. Of course, Cinder hadn't liked her at all, still didn't, but Cinder had become, with every year, an increasing brat. No, that was not quite right either. She was more of a stranger to him, than anything. And her habit of walking around half-naked upstairs put his nerves on edge. He promised himself he would talk to her about it.

"She looks too much like her mother," he reflected. He supposed he was bitter. Oh well, hell, so was everyone. But they hadn't been the type of family that went, together, to counseling.

He had tried that: Cinder, Julia, himself, all sitting in front of some doe-eyed lady shrink, several years ago. Julia, of course, had been willing. Cinder merely sat there, sullenly.

The shrink--what was her name?--had talked to him later in a curt telephone conversation that was their last.

"Your daughter is a very bright girl, but she seems wracked by guilt because of her mother. I think it might be best just to lay it on the line with her about what you expect from her, and, you know, it is a two-way street, and..."

But, somehow, "tough love" had never worked on Cinder, and as long as she managed to get good grades, he gave her an allowance, and left her alone.

He carefully combed his hair, put some spritz on the comb, and went back over it. He had always had good hair for a man his age. Not a hint of baldness.

The one thing that had really hurt him, as far as his strange daughter was concerned, was the way she treated her brother. For

many years, she hadn't really, wanted anything to do with him. He was a reminder of her mother, he reflected. But she refused to help with him, even when he was sick, and she, mostly, never paid him any mind. He was sure that, at school, she never even mentioned her brother in Special Ed--her "retard" brother--out of embarrassment. He felt a pang of remorse for a moment, knowing that Bobby, in his own, uncomprehending way, still, looked up to and admired his sister. Even when she had turned her back on him.

But, as the years have gone by, she has grown out of it. I have to admit, she had started to care for him again. So why do I feel so guilty myself today? Is it because I think this is my way of trying to take the burden of caring for him off of my shoulders? Am I doing this for his benefit, or mine?

He sat down heavily on the bed, and wished he was still a smoker. He could smell, from across the hall, the cloying scent of Cinder's clove cigarette wafting through the closed door. Her new rebellion was using her allowance to buy very foul-smelling cigs. It was a sign, he knew she thought, of her "coming-of-age".

Why do people have children? , he wondered. All they ever manage to do is raise your blood pressure and break your heart.

He smiled in the gloom of his bedroom, with his hands resting on his thighs, and his entire image as carefully groomed and thoroughly white middle-class as he could manage to make it. He was ready to drive out into the world today, and be Dad.

He got up from the bed, felt his stomach rumble, and decided to let Bobby sleep for a few minutes more. He would eat breakfast first, and then come back up and get his son as ready as he could for the trip.

"Morning honey."

"Morning Mr. Sleepyhead. As I can tell you already know, your daughter is, uh, already up."

"Oh, yes, I already know. I could hear, smell, and feel the angst. Has she eaten?"

“Enough buttered toast to block an artery. Want some coffee?”

“Please.”

She poured him a cup, and he felt the curling tendrils of goodness lick him again. He could smell the richness of the aroma, happily picked the cup up and sipped, while Julia ladled eggs and bacon out onto his plate.

He tore in, greedily, and began to come to conversation in a gradual way.

“You know, I really think this is going to be the best for Bobby. The woman I talked to seemed so damn sure of herself. The School has a great--sterling, really--reputation. I mean, they sure charge enough tuition.”

“I think it will be a good change for all of us. You work so hard, Will.”

“We work hard, Julia. And it’s not like we get any help from his sister.”

She looked down at the table for a moment, while he slowly munched. She took a cigarette from her pack lit it, pulled the smoke, into her lungs, let it out in a gradual stream, and said, “She’s at a difficult age, Will.”

“She’s *been* at a difficult age most of her life--ever since we got married, Julia.”

He ran a napkin across his lips, and she said, “I know. And, maybe, there’s nothing that we can ever really do about that. Has she said anything else about college? I mean, this is her senior year, and her grades are impeccable.”

He looked disappointedly back down at his plate, sopped some egg yolk onto his toast, and said, “She hasn’t. In fact, she hasn’t even applied, and apparently doesn’t care. She just doesn’t realize, is all. She thinks the world is some kind of rock music party.”

“It’s not like she runs with a bad crowd,” Julia shrugged her shoulders.

“She doesn’t run with *any* crowd. Maybe that’s part of the

problem. She's too much of a loner. She goes out of her way to be different, and people are uncomfortable with that."

Suddenly, they could hear Cinder coming down the stairs, and they both lowered their voices.

She looked a little dreadful, and a little cute. Her jeans were heavily patched with embroidered rock band patches, and her blouse looked as if it had been ripped off somebody at Woodstock. Her lipstick was black, and she smelled like clove cigarettes and smelly, oily scent. She had on her glasses with the thick, dark frames.

She looked like she was trying out for MTV.

"Morning daughter."

She looked at him, and was at once in love.

"Good morning Daddy."

She looked at him: He was so damned handsome--kids at school always told her Dad looked like some macho action-star, like maybe Harrison Ford. She thought they had really hit the nail with that description. She might be a brat sometimes, she realized, but deep down, she loved her father with a fierce love that made her, often, want to weep.

Yeah, to her Daddy was a little like a cross between Han Solo and the Lone Ranger. She looked across the table at Julia, and the feelings curdled somewhat.

Now, what the hell had he been doing with *that* woman for five years? Julia was, definitely, as far as she was concerned, no looker. Daddy should have been able to do a lot better.

For one thing, the bitch was too old. By about eight years, she figured. Julia had not aged well, although she might have, Cinder thought, at one time had the same sort of allure of really professional women, who dressed in black skirts and rayon blouses, and who typed from stacked folders at desks in front offices all over the width and breadth of America. But her lipstick was too red, her eyes a little too sunken, her cheeks too hollow. She was bone thin, and her blond hair a little too stringy, too bottle-blond. Her teeth were stained with coffee and cigarette

smoke, and her voice was husky and irritating, and sometimes shrill (if that's a conceivable combination). She always looked as if she was on the verge of jittering to pieces, particularly when she was frustrated by something.

And, Jesus, could she be a *bitch* when she wanted to!

Cinder had found this out firsthand, right after Daddy had married Julia and they had all moved into the new house to be one big dysfunctional family.

Cinder had been playing by herself in her room one afternoon, several years ago, while Daddy was at work. Well, really, she had been moping in her room, leafing through books and teenage magazines, and staring out the window at the gray curling clouds and the incessant patter of rain on the window. She wouldn't leave her room, though. Not even to watch TV. Julia would want to spend time with her, talk to her, get to "know" her better.

Uh uh. No way, Jose. She would rather sit up here alone.

"Cin! Cin, I've, uh, I've fixed us some lunch! You want to come down and eat?"

She jumped. The voice was too nervous; too shrill. She had hated Julia from the moment she set eyes upon her, and even Daddy, with all his talk of "his two girls getting along, mind your manners, Cin", just didn't understand that, even if she tried to like Julia, Cinder knew, deep down, that Julia was never going to like *her*. Not really.

And Cinder hated the way Julia, sometimes, would "fake" liking her. It made her skin crawl.

She had walked over to her bedroom door, cracked it open, and yelled, "Uh, Julia, I'm like not really hungry right now. I, uh, I'll be down later, or something."

She closed the door, a little too roughly, and then went and sat down on her bed again. She picked up a magazine. Madonna was like, really hot this year.

Silence.

Then she heard the thump of footsteps on the staircase,

and her heart suddenly sank. Her bedroom door flew open, and standing before her, in the flesh, was the Real Julia, the “nicey-nice” mask ripped away, and the 100% Bitch Mask in its place. She looked like a jackal with long blond hair and bulging eyes.

“Listen to me, young lady! When I tell you to come downstairs and eat, you do what I tell you! Do you understand me? Huh? Am I getting through that thick head of yours?”

All of a sudden, Julia rushed forward, grabbed her in her arms, and said, her face thrust a few inches away from Cinder’s own, “I know you don’t like me. I want you to know I don’t care. I am your father’s wife, and that’s all there is to it. Understand? Understand? Now, I am sick of having to deal with your attitude--moping around here all day--so young lady, I suggest you just get used to it! Now, I am going to go downstairs and fix you a plate. I worked very hard to make you a very good, and healthy lunch. And if you don’t come down and eat it, it’s going right in the garbage. And you can stay up here all day and starve today, for all I care. And I’m sure your father will agree with me.”

Suddenly, her rage spent, Julia retreated somewhat, as if realizing that, for a few terrible moments, she had let the Wicked Queen out from beneath the cover of her façade, and now it was time to put the more amiable costume back on.

“Now, just you remember what I said,” she put out a solitary finger, and then began to smile a little, not exactly sure how to follow up her outburst.

She looked like she had just let a tremendous fart, and was now fleeing the room in embarrassment. Cinder, for her part, stayed bitterly in her room until her father got home, and then slipped downstairs, while he was hovering in the kitchen, knowing that Julia wouldn’t dare breathe a word to him about what had happened earlier that afternoon. At dinner, they both avoided looking at each other as much as possible, and didn’t directly speak. Cinder was sure that her dad at least noticed. But it was only the first of many such dinners.

After breakfast, Bill sighed, pushed himself back from the table, and Julia followed him upstairs to wake Bobby and get him ready,

Great, thought Cinder. I guess that means I get to do the dishes.

They walked into Bobby's room, not bothering, at first, to turn on the light, out of a small kindness. Bill walked up to the old hospital bed, with the iron railings to prevent him from falling out and injuring himself in his sleep. The boy was turned on one side, curled up in a fetal lump under the covers, and for a moment Bill felt a lump growing in his throat.

I'm gonna miss you partner over these long months. But, it's for your own good.

He remembered, in a brief instant, the way Bobby had been before the accident. A growing tyke that loved baseball and sports, who perched a New York Yankees hat on his head, a hat that was comically too large, and who was bright. God, he was the brightest kid in his class, that boy. But then a moments distraction on an icy road, a swerving car, and his first wife had been stolen from him; and his son had had his former being stolen.

You could have been smart, Bobby. Would have been, maybe. a genius.

Bill felt a new surge of guilt wash over him. Was he doing this for the right reasons? Was he just trying to get rid of some burden? Was that how he, secretly, thought of his own son?

"Bobby? Bobby? Time to wake up now partner."

The sleeping body stirred. The head turned around. The face became animate. The sleeping eyes held all the knowledge of a small child in their trusting orbs. Bill suddenly felt like weeping.

"C'mon Bobby, let's have some food. Do you have to go pee?"

"I got go pee, Daddy..."

He rubbed his eyes and yawned. A thirteen year old infant, who would forever be trapped in a body too big and unwieldy for his purposes.

"Well, okay, Julia is gonna help me get you ready and then we are going to go visit a special place today, son. A fun place.

Does that sound like something you would like to do?"

Bill was choking out his words now, and Julia was at his side, helping to lift him up and out of his soiled diaper. They would then lead him into the bathroom, clean his plastic Depends diaper, and help him make water in the toilet. Then they would wash him, dress him, and help him into his braces.

"We go bye, Daddy?"

He smoothed the boys hair back. It was damp with sweat.

"Yes honey. We go bye."

Finally, the car was rumbling in the garage like a hibernating bear come to life. It was a brand new four-door jobbies that Cinder had thought looked really smart when Daddy had brought it home. For a time he considered taking the Bronco, but thought better of it. The Bronco had been acting up lately, and even with the snow (which was remarkably light for as late in the season as it was) the roads were pretty good. Bill got in behind the wheel, roared the engine, perhaps to Julia's chagrin. But he needed the decisive noise this morning, to soften damp, empty feeling that seemed to be stifling him.

He had known that this day was coming for a month, had had the time to make all the preparations. But that didn't make it any easier to let his poor, defenseless son out of his sight. Not for ten months. Not for ten minutes. Not ever. He felt tears slip down his cheeks.

"It's for the best. Goddamnit, I have to believe it is for the best. For his own good. Damn it Bill, stop being selfish!"

He saw the others come through the garage door, Julia holding Bobby's hand, Cinder looking as if she would rather be anywhere else in the western world. His family. Well, he had always done right by them. It was as inevitable as a heavy case of the farts after a big Mexican dinner.

He could no more be a bad Daddy than Reagan could be a good liar.

Then, finally, with everyone seated in their positions, he

thumbed the garage door opener, stopped, turned, and asked his wife, “Did you make sure to lock the doors, turn off the lights, put out your cigarettes, unplug the curling iron, and, for god sakes, unplug the coffee pot, too? I want to have a house to come back too.”

“Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes, and yes. All of it, dear.”

“Okay. Let’s rock.”

Chapter 2

The countryside breezed by, but Cinder hardly even noticed.

She had her headphones on. Ozzy. She needed to forget about this ride. She *majorly* needed to forget that she was sitting beside her brother, who, she always felt, ever since the accident, had carried a sort of *stench* with him. A stench not unlike the high, cloying reek of urine. But very faint. She thought her aversion to sitting next to him might be entirely psychological. After all, Dad and Julia always made sure to keep him very neat and clean. But still, she insisted she could smell that smell. And she always thought of it, with a little guilt, as the smell of retards. A stench of her retarded brother.

Plus, he sometimes babbled, and Julia always babbled, and dad liked country music--so she leaned back and listened to Ozzy sing about running off the rails like a crazy train. She suddenly got lost in a terrific sort of mental movie in which there were werewolves, sexy men, beautiful women, full moons, and Ozzy Osborne in the middle of it, in her own private music video.

She knew she was good with images. She had been drawing for some time, and had even painted a little, and she knew she had a natural flair for the artistic. For the imagistic. Well, God bless. It had carried her through some drastic bad times.

Every once in a while she would pop her half-drowsing head up and try to imagine what her dad and Julia were talking about. She thought it was funny just to look at them as their lips

moved, as their faces gesticulated. She thought they were probably discussing what a bitch she was.

She closed her eyes and started to dream.

He spat into an old spittoon, ran his filthy hand across his lips and sat back. His head was spinning. Damn. Why had he drank so much last night? Well, it wasn't as if he had any choice anymore, but it seemed like every time he did it, and then swore to himself it would never happen again, he always ended up breaking his oath. Well, he supposed he was just that sort of man, *yesiree*.

But he had to drink. Had to. It was the only way to keep his thought together anymore, to keep some distance from himself and his life. A man had to have something or he might as well just go jump in a lake insane.

He looked around him in the darkness, his eyes peering around at the same drab, familiar sights he had known all his days. The calendar on the wall had a huge photo of some babe on it with big tits. He liked that, at least, this morning. It almost brought back a hint of color to his cheeks.

He got up slowly, let out a very tiny, cutting fart, scratched himself, and sauntered out to look up and down the road. That road hadn't seen a lot of business lately, and more often than not the register was emptier than the space between his cousin Daryl Wehunt's ears. Cousin. He remembered he had to take care of cousin later today.

He went back inside, sat down behind the counter, smoked one in a long series of cheap cigarettes, and waited for some unlucky tourists to run low on gas. His prices were good, mainly because his product was an inferior, low-grade fuel that was heavily diluted and probably harder on an engine than pouring sugar in the gas tank. Ah well, such was the way of the world.

He nearly nodded back to sleep, his cigarette dipping low on his chin, when he heard the door buzzer and foot steps. He jolted awake, and his eyes swam into focus on a great, oafish

hillbilly in bib overalls with a coif of hair that would have made Elvis Presley proud. He stood up slowly.

“What can I do *fer yuns?*”

“Ah, I just need a pop and a pack of smokes. Charlie, is sleeping all you do all day?”

“No. Sometimes I drink in between naps.”

The men broke into mutual, raspy laughter.

“Say, how’d you make out with that girl you was *a-seeing?* That little colored thing...what was her name?”

“She wasn’t no colored Pops. She was a *Puerto Rican.*”

“She was a nigger if ever I saw one. But, tell me, did you get any poontang off of that little *high-yaller* cunt? Did ya?”

He looked dismally into the old mans face for a moment, and then decided to humor him. He put his fist out and pumped it in a little back and forth motion, while making a groaning noise in his throat.

More laughter. Pops overpaid for his Coke and smokes, and said, “Well, alright, boy! I knew you’d finally lose your virginity!”

“Aw fuck you.”

“No, fuck you!”

“No, fuck you!”

“No sir, fuck you! See ya later, Pops!”

The mountainous old country bumpkin turned slowly and ambled out the glass door. The buzzer went off again, a little too loudly for Charlie’s comfort, and he winced, watching as “Pops” McGruder got in his beat up old truck, shuffled a minute, started the engine, and drove back down the road. The entire action must have taken another ten minutes, and he had seen it countless times before.

Out here, everything moves slowly. Why is it that life seems to go by....so slowly? Charlie reflected, for a moment, if there was any way to make time go by quicker, and then decided it was no good wondering why the world was the way it was.

“Yep, that stuff is way over my head,” he said to himself, and lit another cigarette.

Who the hell was old McGruder to poke fun at him? Everybody knew the old man was as queer as a clockwork orange, and hadn't it been only a few years ago he was arrested for "soliciting a minor for immoral purposes"? How he had gotten out of that scrape was a mystery. But it probably helped if the judge was a distant relative.

He kicked his boots up on the counter and started to fade off again. In his dreams, he was a slicked-up city boy, wining and dining the women. He wore fancy suits, ate at the best restaurants, and drove a brand new sports car. None of which, he reflected, was ever going to happen to him in real life.

Usually this dream segued into his own private porno flick, set in his own private penthouse in his own private version of a jet set playboy lifestyle. His fantasy women were all interchangeable variations on the same surgically-augmented, massively breasted cyber babe theme. All with black miniskirts, long blond hair, heavy makeup, and no brain cells.

And a perfect willingness to do threesomes, foursomes, orgies. He could feel his pecker grow just a little stiff, in spite of himself.

He sat up, looked out the window, up and down the road, and decided it was time to step his fantasy up a notch. He got up, walked out from behind the counter, went into the back, and rummaged through a beat-up, filthy desk adorned with overflowing ashtrays and half-drunk cups of Styrofoam coffee, and opened the bottom drawer.

He leafed under some greasy folders until his fingers set upon a slick fuck magazine he had stuffed away for his moments alone. He slipped it out, closed the drawer with one toe of his cowboy boots, and began to flip through the pages, with trembling fingers. He could feel his breath grow a little ragged.

The magazine, which was called *Young Snatch*, was the typical, if rather even more low-brow, version of porno bookstore fair like *Hustler* and *Gallery*. The pages were full of full-color shots of young women getting screwed in every imaginable position.

The bonus was, the magazines had recently started showing full penetration.

He pulled his stiffy out of the front of his jeans, and began to massage it between his filthy fingers. He was still standing, as it were, in the direct line of vision of anyone that should happen to drive up, walk through the door, and demand service.

“Yeah, I’ll give them some service alright,” he began to moan to himself. “If it’s a sexy woman, or even a sexy man...I’ll give them all the service they need. Right here. Oh yeah, baby. Oooh!”

His headache was hammering, but it was competing in his hot little consciousness for his mounting, and irrational, arousal. He could barely keep the magazine from shaking in his fingers.

He realized, suddenly, that he was still standing in the doorway, and so he scooted further into the back storeroom, his cock standing out in front of him like a flesh flagpole at full attention, and opened the employees restroom, a shit-smelling closet with a rusted toilet and a filthy sink.

It smelled old and sour. He sort of liked that. When he was young, he was passionately in lust with an aunt of his, whose entire apartment had, somewhat the same smell. He associated that particular odor with soiled panties, with his aunts round thighs, with forbidden, dripping lust...

He pulled his tight jeans all the way down to the ankles of his cowboy boots, turned, and plopped his hairy ass on the john. He gently played with his meat, doing a sort of twisting-cock-and-balls movement that kept him partially rigid. Then, he began to flip the slick pages, looking for something he could lodge in his mind as a pure, viable, and somewhat realistic masturbation fantasy.

He flipped through page after page of silicone-enhanced, rail-thin, bleach-blond barbettes, fantasizing wildly, creating and collapsing skits and scenes and realities, becoming all the players, male and female. Talking to himself. Speaking in different, heated voices.

“Oh bitch! Oh bitch! You like it, don’t you bitch?”

“Oh, yes, big daddy, come in my mouth...my mouth...ah!”

He stroked himself to that final, shattering point, his blood throbbing in his ears, his passion building to a white-hot point, when, suddenly, maddeningly, he heard the door buzzer screech.

Ah, goddamn it! Right at the peak moment!

“Hello? Hello?”

He heard some guy walk around up front, toward the back. He began to pump even harder, trying to hurry it up.

“I--I’ll be right there!”

Ooooh!

Suddenly, fireworks exploded behind his eyelids, and he shot his wad all over the filthy, streaked floor. He leaned back, gasping, trying to get himself together. Now, he could face the customers with a smile.

Cinder had been half-dozing, trying to block out the image of her little brother, who was streaming a thin rope of snot down into his lap. Her ears were now sizzling from the rock on her headphones, but she decided it was better than listening to Dad and Julia bitch at each other.

For one thing, Dad had gotten off on the wrong exit on the Interstate, or something. At one point, he had pulled over, grabbed the map from the glove box, and spent twenty minutes with a slip of paper he had written directions on, and tracing the various varicose lines on the atlas with one long, rigid finger.

Ah hell, so what if it took a few extra hours.

They had had lunch at McDonalds, and Julia had traded places in the back to help feed Bobby his cheeseburger, and, mercifully, thought Cinder, to wipe his face. She had sat sullenly in the front with Dad, and munched her own chicken salad.

“You know pumpkin, I think these sandwiches use to taste a lot better. I remember, when you were a little girl--well, you’re still a little girl to me--but, when you were a little girl, you always

begged us, no matter what, to take you to McDonalds. For a Happy Meal.”

“Ah, Daddy, I just wanted the toy surprise inside.”

“Yeah right. They always had some cheap, junk toy inside. Some movie promotion, or something. Ah, those were the days, weren’t they Punky? Jeez, what happens to the time?”

She chewed silently for a moment and considered. True, she didn’t feel old...but what if one didn’t feel old for many years, but grew old and decrepit anyway? What if age was something that just slipped across you like a fog, until, before you knew any better, you were sixty, and everyone around you had died, and no one found you attractive, anymore. She could conceive a day when she looked into the mirror, and, instead of seeing her own, young, geeky, half-way attractive self, she would see a withered old crone staring back at her. She suddenly didn’t have much of an appetite.

“Dad, do you think this school will really be able to help Bobby? I mean, uh...Will he be happy there, do ya think?”

Bill suddenly looked a little less cheery. A little less certain.

“Yes. Honey. I think he will...I know he will. I have to believe that.”

“I know Daddy. Daddy, I love you.”

“I love you to, Punky.”

Suddenly, Julia’s voice grated from the backseat.

“Oh, will you two stop being so serious, please?”

She tried to sound as if she was joking, but even Daddy could tell, Cinder was sure, that Julia was exposing some of the jealousy she tried so hard to keep hidden beneath her icy bitch exterior. Hell, her relationship with Daddy was so special, Cinder knew, that it was a place that Julia found alien, and uncomfortable. Well, fuck her. Cinder suddenly felt good all over.

Then, it was back out onto the roads of Northeastern Kentucky, trying to figure out, exactly, how the hell to get Bobby to this special retreat.

“I must have taken the wrong exit,” he said irritably. “That’s all

there is too it. I just wonder how the hell we get back to where we need to go. None of this looks familiar.”

Indeed, the landscape of farms and rotting barns, and old clapboard houses looked very familiar to anyone from the Midwest, Cinder thought, but knew better than to speak when Daddy was trying hard to concentrate.

“Lessee...70 to 75, to I-64...goes into Lexington...Ashland is here, go any further across and we’d have crossed into West Virginia...Town of Newport just twenty two miles away. Where in the hell am I?”

“I’m sure I don’t know dear. Why don’t you stop and ask directions.”

“Julia...I have it under control.”

“I’m sure dear. But we’ve been driving for over two hours and not getting anywhere. WHY DON’T YOU STOP AND ASK DIRECTIONS?”

Bitch.

“Hey, as soon as I find someplace to stop...okay. But, I am only human, Julia.”

Evil bitch. Why didn’t she just stay home today? Make this a real family affair.

Cinder leaned back in her seat, popped her headphones back on, and changed the tape from *Ozzy*, to *Nick Cave*. When passing through an area of country this desolate, it was *Nick Cave*, or it was nothing at all.

On the longest, most unforgiving stretch of back road, situated between a stand of trees and a low, marshy field. Daddy found the most forlorn, desolate old-fashioned gas station in North America.

“Jeezus, is this place even open for business?” he asked himself, turning into the parking lot while Julia leaned back in her seat, looked vaguely, and somewhat disgustedly out the passenger side window, and chewed her bottom lip.

Cinder clicked off her headphones, and decided to get out.

She was really starting to need a smoke, and besides, the music was only really good if you were still traveling.

“Hey Julia,” she said, probably a little too loudly.

“Huh?”

“I need a smoke. Could you please?”

Julia huffed a sigh, opened her door, thrust her skinny, too-pale legs out the door, got out in a sort of exasperated huff, pushed her seat back, and said, “Just watch out for Bobby, okay?”

As if I need to be reminded. Bitch.

Cinder carefully got out, making sure not to bump or disturb her brother, who despite all the excitement, had managed, it seemed, to lull himself back to sleep.

Cinder got out, sliding carefully past Julia, who got back in the car in the same quick, exasperated huff. Cinder proudly took her pack of Djharum black out of her pocket, took one long, skinny black stick out, and lit up.

“Hey, Cin, make sure you stand away from the pumps, okay?”

She half-turned, shot Julia a little glance, as if to say, *I had every intention of blowing us to kingdom come*, and walked to the edge of the lot, facing out into the road. She was starting, for some reason, to like today a lot less.

Bill entered the filthy little gas station with a shake of his head, and his road atlas. Well, maybe a local could shed some light on this. But he was sure he had gotten the directions right on the phone. And he wasn't the sort of man that would just take off, half-cocked, without knowing *exactly* where he was going.

The station, which bore the somewhat ironic name of “Wehunt Gas”, was seemingly still open for whatever passed for business here. He strolled up to the counter, waited a long moment, expecting the employee to emerge from the back, and drummed his fingers against the greasy countertop.

He could hear, beyond the open storeroom door, a faint,

muffled groaning, and for a moment he was half-way convinced that, maybe, they had happened upon a robbery in progress...or one that had just occurred. Were was the clerk? Tied up in back?

He walked into the dimly-lit storeroom and around a corner bulkhead of cardboard boxes, his shoes scraping on the gritty floor. Damn, there was an inch of muck on the cement back here, at least.

He heard the groaning come from the only door labeled *men*.

He knocked, briskly.

"H-hello? Sir?"

Silence.

"J-just a minute, man! I'll be right there."

Either he has explosive diarrhea, or he's keeping a date with Rosy Palmer and her five sisters. Either way, I need service quickly.

"Okay. Just making sure everything is alright."

Bill walked back out to the counter. In a few moments, and with a trickling flush, a scrubby young man with greasy hair, a Confederate Flag cap, heavy tattoos, and dirty blue work shirt with the arms ripped out, emerged and flashed an ugly grin. He was, predictably, missing some front teeth. He likewise, predictably, had not shaved, showered, or seemingly cleaned beneath his fingernails in what, presumably, might have been months. Maybe...years.

He smelled like a combination of motor oil, body odor, cigarettes, and cheap booze. Bill guessed that his name might be Vern.

"What can I do *fer yuns*?"

Bill looked at him for a moment, trying to stifle a lopsided grin. He thought he had caught the man moaning something along the lines of, "Oh baby, give it to me one more time."

Suddenly, for a reason he could not fathom, he asked , innocently, "What were you doing back there?"

"Taking a shit."

"Ah. Well, I guess we all gotta do that now and

again...lemme see. Well I need eight dollars gas.”

“Okay.” The man said slowly. His eyes were bloodshot, and his breath didn’t smell like roses, but Bill realized he was trying to do his job at least, so.

“I uh...my family and I are from Indiana, and we are trying to get my son to school here. The, uh, well, maybe you’ve heard of it: Saint Thomas Aquinas School?”

Pause.

“No. Nope, can’t say that I have.”

The young man shook his head. His “can’t” was pronounced *cain’t*.

“Well, here are the directions. Um, and here is my map. And, um, well, could you just maybe? Uh maybe, take a look?”

Bill put the map and the directions down on the counter, and the young man looked slightly irritated. He thrust one skinny, tattooed arm onto the counter, leaned over, and stank to high heaven.

“Well, let’s see here Mister. Um, well, how did you come in? You’re in Pleasant Point, by the way. We don’t get many people through here that ain’t from around. You know, it’s mostly just a bunch of old farmers and *sheepfuckers*. Pardon my French.”

“Well, we got off on 69, and I could have swore I got off on the wrong exist...but, all we’ve seen so far is a bunch of country that doesn’t look familiar. At least not to me. And I come to Kentucky quite a bit for business.”

He looked down at the Road Atlas. All the lines seemed to be intersecting, skinny snakes. He hadn’t bothered to explain to this fancy fucker that he couldn’t read a map to save his life.

Couldn’t read period.

“Well, all I can tell you is that road should lead you back up to the Interstate if you just keep on following it.”

He stood up on wobbly legs, and was ready to take the money for the gas and be done with it when, all of a sudden, he glanced out the long window over the cigarette rack and spied one lone, solitary female standing smoking at the edge of the tarmac.

Suddenly, a pale flicker of a thought crossed his mind. A sort of silent signal hidden deep within the recesses of his hot little brain. It was secured tightly in the same part of himself that dissolved when he ambled at five in the morning to work. It was like an invisible fiber of nerves in a second skin.

He was having the flashes of a fever dream.

"You know, actually, if you all want to save yourself some time," he began slowly, "and cut out a lot of backtracking, you might try driving into Pleasant Point and asking the Sheriff over there. Dale Aubrey. He's a good buddy of mine. He could sure as shit tell you how to get there. Me, I'm just a dumb gas station clerk. What the hell do I know?"

He smiled and made a little forced laugh, but his mind was zeroing in, almost against his will, on other subjects.

Bill stood up straight, looked glum, said, "Well, I do need to be back at a reasonable hour. You know, *work*. How far away is Pleasant Point?"

"Huh? Oh, Pleasant Point. Well, you're in *Mount* Pleasant now. If you want to drive into town, just go north all the way down until you reach the first intersecting road, hook a right, take that road till you get to the tracks, hook another right, and follow that all the way down to Main. Sheriff's Station is right there. *Cain't* miss it."

Pause.

"Probably only take you fifteen minutes or so."

Bill straightened up, began to fold his McMann Realty 2005 Road Atlas, and frowned. He stood for a moment, looking down at a dying fly straggling its way across the floor toward infinity.

"Thanks. Oh, yeah, here."

He handed the clerk a ten and said, "keep the change."

"Thank you, sir. Hope you and yours have a good day, and find that there school you're looking for."

"Yeah. Have a nice day."

Dumbass.

He watched him walk over to his nice new car, open the

gas tank, pump, close the tank, and get in. He started fussing with his wife about something, and even from here Charlie could tell that, hot damn, she was a looker too. Just like the daughter, except long blond hair, he thought.

Fancy fucker. High-living, rich, *educated* sumbitch. What he wouldn't like to walk out there right now, take that son of a bitch's wife by her scrawny neck, and twist until his pecker got hard.

Yeah, go on. Drive on down to Pleasant Point. See how far you get on our watered-down gas. Make sure to tell Sheriff Aubrey I said hi.

Oh, by the way--he's still hanging from a tree in town square.

Chapter 3

The planned visit to Pleasant Point did nothing to help the situation.

The sun was starting to dip below the horizon now, and Cinder realized, with a faint twinge of unease, that the day had not gone right at all. Daddy was swearing a lot now, moving up and down dusty roads, through fields, kicking up dirt, and trying in vain to get oriented to where he was. The roads out here were old, crumbling; the road signs seemed to be all wrong, or in some places simply didn't exist, and now Julia was sitting as rigid as a pole, the skin around her lips knotting into a tight little bow.

What was worse, after all the sleep, Bobby had woken up and become very talkative. The mood inside the car was getting progressively sour.

"Look at the cows Daddy. Daddy look at the cows. Cows. Daddy. I like the cows. *Looker see!*"

"I SEE THE COWS BOBBY."

"Bill, don't snap at him."

Silence.

"I just. Don't. Get it. Was the sonofabitch lying to me? Did I take another wrong turn?"

“Jesus Christ, Bill, he probably just wanted to have a laugh getting the Hoosiers to drive way out of their way...getting us lost. I mean, you said he was a hick. A redneck...he probably resented you or, something. Were you arrogant? Did you piss him off?”

Daddy looked as perplexed as he ever had, Cinder thought, but she knew better than to open her trap now. Bobby was still babbling, talking about cows, spacemen, a trip to a cartoon show...Julia, she knew, was not helping the situation any.

The car plummeted through the dips and valleys, past rolling hills and fenced in pastures, and a succession of cows that didn't, at all, look healthy. The entire world now seemed if it was one long, endless panorama of run-to-riot yards, rusted cars on cinderblocks, weathered houses, and forgotten, blackened graveyards.

Cinder looked at as they passed one of these. The headstones were, probably, all unreadable now. Cracked, lying on their sides; what vandals had not desecrated, time and the elements had. She shuddered.

Suddenly, she felt cut off from the world, in a way in which she was not, entirely familiar with. It was a little like waking up in the wee hours of the morning, when everyone else in the house was asleep. Was everyone in the world, finally, all alone when one got right down to it? Didn't those old cemeteries somehow prove that?

After all, everyone, eventually, went out of the world alone. But nobody entered it alone--which was strange to consider.

*It takes a doctor to help you be born, but you can die all on your own.
What a happy thought for the evening.*

Suddenly:

“I want to go home, Daddy. I think we should just try to find our way back and go home.”

She had tried to sound annoyed, but she realized she sounded more scared than anything. The incorrect pitch of her voice had betrayed a faint, tremulous quality that let both of them

know that she was starting to become afraid.

“Honey, I would be more than happy to turn around right now. If I knew where the hell to turn around at. I feel like I’ve been driving in circles for two hours. And I haven’t seen one service station yet. Not one.”

Around them, fields stretched out into the gathering darkness.

“I’m not really worried, Hon. I mean, if worse comes o worse, there has got to be someone out here that will let us use their phone. Hell, farm people are usually pretty friendly. They may even put us up for the night. Bobby could get up in the morning and help them milk the cows. Couldn’t ya, sport?”

He tried to sound calm, but in reality his nerves were more than set on edge. He hadn’t seen any friendly-looking farm houses out here for miles. In fact, nearly every house he had seen looked, well, abandoned. Fields were weed-choked; tractors stood like rusted skeletons of an agricultural era that had long since been shoveled into the earth.

The last straw was when the car broke down. Well, technically, ran out of gas. In the middle of nowhere. Bill managed to guide it to the side of the road, and they sat there for a few moments in confused silence.

They had seen only one other vehicle in the hours that they had driven, and that had been yet another rusted old truck that barreled past them without paying them any mind.

Bill leaned back, sighed, yawned, looked around at his family, and said, “ Well, gang. It looks like we’ve finally hit rock bottom today. I don’t know what happened exactly. I guess, maybe, it’s Murphy’s Law--that said, we have two options. We can stay here and hope a State Policeman comes by, or maybe, just maybe, a friendly local. In which case we could be waiting awhile. Or.”

Julia looked at him tiredly. It was now fully dark, although it was not, really, late. Maybe seven o’clock.

“Or, what? Bill? Bill?”

He turned and looked at her.

“Well, I think it would be best if you guys wait here. Now, surely, there must be someplace up the road a mile or two. With a phone. Maybe even a cop. Hell. We’re in America. You can’t get lost anymore. Not in America.”

Julia fairly hissed, put her forehead in her hand, and said, “Jesus Bill, how in the hell could you have gotten the goddamned directions to the goddamned school so goddamned screwed up? Weren’t you paying attention? And why the hell did you decide to listen to that idiot clerk?”

He looked at her suddenly as if he could knock the living shit out of her, and Cinder realized that Daddy was *mucho* upset. Well, she didn’t blame him one bit. And she sure as hell didn’t want him to go out there and walk alone to the nearest town.

“Daddy no! Please don’t go, I’m scared.”

Bill looked back at Cinder. In truth, he was just a little skittish himself at this point. Hell, the way things had gone today, he wasn’t, exactly, sure what would happen if he got out and started down that road. In light of the situation he could, perhaps, be forgiven for feeling unlucky.

“I’ll be fine, Pumpkin. C’mon. You’re always going on about being a big girl. About being all grown up. Now, we’re probably just right outside of Pleasant Point. I’ll walk up ahead. Maybe--God, surely--there is someone living on one of these old farms who will let me use the phone.”

“Bill, are you sure you know what you’re doing? I mean, what if there are big dogs or something. If you go out there and get bit by something I don’t know what the hell we’d do!”

Bitch. All you ever think about is yourself.

Cinder felt a swell of panic begin to grip her, and did her best to fight it back. Hell, she had always seen Daddy as some kind of superhero. Maybe, with a little luck, he could get a cop to come and drive them to the nearest hotel. Then, Daddy would get a rent-a-car, and they would all drive back to Indianapolis, and

Bobby would not go to the special school after all. Because Daddy would not think of driving down to this particular, bassackwards area of Kentucky ever again. Too many bad omens, and she knew full well that, deep down, Daddy knew when God was trying to tell him something.

“Bill, at least take the map with you--”

“That map has done no damn good all day!” He rubbed his eyes tiredly. He wasn’t in the mood for a long, lonely walk, but he was the Man of the House. And, well, when duty called...

“All of these goddamn roads have been unmarked. Not on the map. I can’t make heads or tails of anything tonight, and frankly, all I want to do is get to a hotel or something, get something to eat; sleep. We might be able to convince somebody to let us sleep in their house tonight. Hell, I’m carrying enough cash to sweeten the deal. I’ll take the flashlight. You know I was a Marine for five years. I can take care of myself.”

He leaned over, kissed Julia, and then turned back and looked at his children.

“Honey, I promise, if I don’t find anything I’ll be back in an hour.”

Cinder looked down at her lap, nodded, said, “*Okay, Daddy.*”

He knew she was choking back frightened tears, and he didn’t want to leave them, particularly. But they couldn’t very well stay there all night, just because he, himself, was now spooked. He thumbed Bobby’s cap, told him he loved him, and watched, for a moment as the boy stirred. He turned back around, opened the glove box, and took out a small handgun.

“This shoots flares. If anything happens--”

“Bill!”

“I said *if* anything happens, don’t hesitate to use this. It will blow a hole in something as big as your fist. I know you can use a gun Julia. See you in a little bit.”

And with that, and heaving a gusty sigh, he opened his door, got out, and closed, it, leaning back into the window and

saying, "I'll be back. Roll up the windows and make sure all your doors are locked. I love you guys."

He began to walk, and Julia leaned over and turned on the headlights, to give him some illumination. Some comfort, in the night.

Cinder watched her Daddy walk away slowly, swinging his arms with a confidence that she knew must, surely, be slipping a bit. His figure was ghostly in the headlight glow. She couldn't stop watching his image slip away.

An odd silence settled in in the car. The only sound was rumbling stomachs, cicada, and occasional tired sigh.

"Julia."

Silence.

"What dear?"

"I'm really scared."

"I know. It will be okay. Your dad is a tough, brave man. He'll be back soon."

Julia cradled the flare gun in her lap.

"Do you want to get out for awhile and stretch your legs? I need a smoke, anyway."

"Yeah, so do I. Bobby? Bobby?"

Cinder leaned over and began to nudge her little brother.

"Wha?--wha, Sissy? I *aseepin*."

"We're gonna get out for awhile, Bobby. C'mon, you need to stretch your legs a little bit."

Julia got out, moved the seat up, and started to help him out, gingerly. It was difficult going because of the braces, but finally she got him out of the car and had him standing, shakily outside. Cinder crawled out after him, eager for a cigarette. It had been hours since they had eaten, and who knew how much longer it might be before they could get settled in, and maybe get some food somewhere.

"It's at least a beautiful night."

Julia and Cinder both lit their cigarettes, and leaned against the car, blowing clouds of scent around them, smoke twirling away in the gentle breeze.

Cinder ambled over to the tall fence that bounded the bedraggled field which they had parked next to. She realized, for the first time, just how alone they were out here. And not a sign of anyone for miles. It was like they had wandered into an episode of the Twilight Zone. But, at least the stars, and the cicada chirp, somehow made the night more bearable. More beautiful, in a strange way. She was attracted to a beauty, at times, which she knew the average person could not appreciate.

"Well, this is certainly a change from our typical routine, huh Cin?"

"Yeah, " said Cinder, not really knowing what to say, and not having much of anything to say to Julia, at all.

But at least she's being more friendly now. The least I can do is try to reciprocate. Make this all more pleasant.

"Yeah, the stars really are beautiful tonight. I can't see the moon though."

"That's cause there isn't any. The light from the stars, by the way, took a million plus years to make it here. Those stars may not even be there now."

I think I know that. Bitch.

Julia dragged deeply on her cigarette, turned, looked across the road, at the rolling field, rotting barn, and dilapidated, boarded-up house nestled farther down in a stand of trees.

"Spooky out here. I hope your father hurries up. Oh, I don't know what the hell he was thinking when he started out this morning without knowing--exactly--where it was he was going!"

"Julia?"

Pause.

"What?"

"We're going to look back on all this in a few days and laugh our asses off."

She suddenly sounded consoling.

“Oh yes dear, of course. This sort of thing happens all the time. Your father will find someone to help us. Hell, no one can go wandering around old houses at night without getting stopped, frisked, fingerprinted, interrogated, and fined by the local pork. It’s just a waiting game now.”

Cinder started to laugh. It was Julia’s saving grace: her sometimes flashes of sardonic wit. Smoke drifted like phantom fingers in the quiet, country breeze.

In truth, Julia did not feel like being funny at all.

Everything had been, somehow, wrong, the further into this miserable ass-backwards state they had driven. Missing road-signs, bad directions, lack of anything even remotely like hospitality in the manner of the bitter, impoverished locals. And now they were caught here in this strange Devil’s Triangle of rural Kentucky, a place that seemed as lonesome and forlorn as a wasteland, with miles of empty country road, rolling hills, deep briars, and desolate, empty houses rotting in the wind.

Jesus, this was not how she remembered this state. Not at all.

She suddenly felt disoriented and afraid. Just where in the hell were they? Her eyes scanned the horizon for signs of light and life, but the deep, moonless night seemed to forbid the penetration of eyesight. Up ahead, around the bend, Bill would probably still be walking. Alone. With his arms swinging, and his big, courageous heart keeping him steady. But the night often held secrets, she knew.

She feared for him. She looked down at her watch. 12:15. He had been gone for about forty-five minutes now. *Well, give it a little more time before you start getting too panicky.*

They each smoked a few cigarettes between them. Bobby ambled, precariously, over the rough clumps of grass. He looked like he had made a boo-boo.

“Shit, I need to change him, Cin. Want to help?”

There had been one bathroom break since they had driven away from the gas station, and it had been an undignified roadside

stop with the three adults taking turns in the bushes. Thankfully, Julia always carried a box of tissue paper with her, and they had managed to wipe up as best they could. Fortunate for them, there had been no lunch or dinner to make their bowels any fuller than breakfast had.

Cinder suddenly realized she was thirsty and starving. She had finished a Coke and some candy bars a few hours earlier, and her stomach was starting to grumble hard. Maybe losing her appetite was what she needed.

“Yeah. Sure. I thought he started to smell a little ripe.”

Julia reached into the car and pulled out her blue and pink diaper bag. She used disposables in place of the plastic Depends for when she was on the road, in just such an emergency. She also carried a fair amount of bottled water, Cinder suddenly realized, and before she could say anything, Julia handed her the large plastic thermos and said, “Here. Take some. We’ll need the rest of it to clean him up, but we can’t afford to dehydrate either. I wish we had made your father take a few gulps before he left.”

It’s been almost an hour. Where the hell is he? Why isn’t he back yet?

She sighed again, realized this wasn’t going to be easy. She didn’t want to put him in the grass, so instead she led Bobby to the hood of the car, helped him on top, and told him to lay back. Cinder helped her take his pants off.

The diaper smelled disgusting. And it was disgusting, and Cinder was surprised she hadn’t noticed the smell of the shit while confined in the car. But Julia kept Bobby so clean, so tidy—maybe it was the baby powder or odor-absorbent diapers that did the trick. Whatever it was, she felt her stomach churn mercilessly at the reeking funk of the shitty diaper, and Julia made damn sure to toss it, holding it in the tips of her fingers, her face curling into a little sour mask, far into the field beyond.

Cinder looked at her sprawled, naked, filthy brother; she had never realized before how small, how shrunken his genitals were. He was almost thirteen, and he had always been small, unhealthy, even before the accident. But he was hung like a baby,

and the curled, limp, white ugliness of his cock mad her gag again. She also realized, with a submerged sense of pity, that, in all his life, it was certain that no one, no man or woman, would probably ever want to hold her brother, and love him, and that, fundamentally, it made no difference if his member was tiny or not.

Julia acted with practiced speed, cleaned him, powdered him, and put another diaper on his skinny little butt. Cinder then helped her get him back into his pants, being careful not to show Julia how nauseated she now felt, and they helped Bobby stand back up, and get some dignity back.

“Sissy I do good. I do good? Sissy? I do good?”

“Yeah, Bobby. Sure. You did just fine.”

“You’re okay now honey. Daddy will be back in just a little bit, and we’ll all go to a diner and get something to eat and go to bed. You’d like that wouldn’t you?”

Bobby yawned and rubbed his eyes. Suddenly, as if struck by a bolt of lightening, Julia popped up and said, “Oh shit. I forgot all about that. Wait.”

She walked around to the driver’s side door, leaned in, and popped open the trunk. Cinder watched as she went in back, pawed through some of Bobby’s luggage, and came out with a plastic sack full of wrapped goodies.

“I forgot I packed some of his favorite things to take with him for snacks. Peanut butter and jelly, apples, beans and wieners, chocolate grahams...Carrot and celery sticks. Anybody hungry?”

For one surreal moment, Cinder thought she could actually learn to love Julia. A little, at least.

They sat in the car, glumly munching, but for the moment thankful that they had just a little food to share. They ate greedily, half-starved, not used to going without hot dinners. Cinder ate some beans and wieners, a half of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and drank a juice drink in a plastic envelope that helped real good but she feared would make her even thirstier. Bobby ate the most, and Julia the least. But Julia was very thin, often ate like

a bird, and could sustain herself on a thimbleful of protein a day. Cinder felt some of her energy return. Suddenly, her mind fixed on the amount of time Daddy had been gone.

Bobby ate, or rather, was fed, from the fingers of Julia and Cinder, and then, almost immediately afterward, drifted back to a kind of resigned slumber. Julia was at least thankful for this. Outside, the night seemed to close in again, even more cold and unfriendly than before. It had been made a tad cheerier by the food, but the food was gone now; only the anxiety began to return like a creeping serpent that had been repulsed and held at bay for a few minutes.

“Where is he? Julia, what time is it?”

She looked down at her watch. Opened her eyes tiredly, exhaustedly. She frowned.

“Nearly One thirty. It’s been well over an hour. But, he may have found someone. Maybe making arrangements. Your father is a very resourceful man, Cin.”

“I know. I just can’t help--do you think we should go look for him? I mean, together?”

Julia’s head popped around, and she said, a little too impatiently, “What about Bobby? Who is going to look after him while you and I go tramping around in the dark? What if he wakes up?”

Cinder was caught between a rock and a place she didn’t want to be--on one hand, she couldn’t just sit here all night, waiting on pins and needles, wondering if Daddy was alright. On the other hand, the idea of her baby brother waking up, alone, in a locked car--screaming in terror and confusion, pissing himself in fear, made her want to cry. Either way, she knew she wouldn’t be able to relax until she saw her father walking back up the road in the moonlight, or--even better-- being driven by someone with a little common decency. A rescuer.

She leaned back, huffed a miserable sigh, suddenly hated the confining car, so lost and useless out here in the middle of nowhere, in a strange country setting that, seemingly, was as

desolate as the icy cavity beneath her ribcage felt right now.

“Julia?”

“What, Cin?”

“Promise me something.”

“What?”

“Promise that, once we get home, the next time Daddy wants to drive us all to Kentucky, or wherever, for whatever reason, on a long trip, just do me one favor.”

“What?”

“Kick him in the balls.”

Julia burst out laughing, and Cinder joined her a little, despite everything. Suddenly, Julia did something that surprised Cinder very much. She reached into her purse, after seemingly winning a struggle with herself, and pulled out a little plastic baggie hidden in a secret compartment. For a moment, Cinder was so shocked she completely forgot everything else except what Julia was rolling between her skinny, painted, manicured fingernails.

Cinder sniggered, “Shit! You do come prepared.”

Julia looked back at her with a sort of half-embarrassed grin, and said, “Your Dad doesn’t like it. But, he knows--sometimes--it’s the only thing that calms me down. I know you smoke too. Or at least, your father *knows* you smoke, and I suspect that you do. Want some?”

“Oh God, Julia, thank you. You are, like, so cool.”

“Well,” she said, putting one final, expert twist on the joint (Julia always did everything with a deftness and neatness that was inspiring), and said, “I know we haven’t, always, gotten along, Cin. I’d like to change that, if we could. I mean, I know I’ll never be a replacement for your mother...”

Cinder suddenly felt a small sense of guilt well up in here, and an uncharacteristic warmth of familiarity with Julia that made the situation just a little bit better.

“Oh stop it, Jules...I’m a brat. I’ve always been a brat. I can’t help it. It’s just that after the accident and the funeral, I just

never stopped...you know..."

Julia shook her head, and her face went a little slack.

"Your mother was a friend of mine...and a good one. Here."

She lit the joint, inhaled deeply, and held the smoke in for a moment, and passed the joint along to Cinder. The girl took it carefully, still looking at the beautiful, strange wife her father had chosen, and took a toke. A too powerful one. My, wasn't Daddy going to be surprised when he got back and found his girls as stoned as a couple of dirty hippies?

Cinder coughed a few times, and handed (*passed*, she reminded herself. *You don't "hand" a joint around. You pass it around. God, I'm still so square!*) the reefer back to Julia, who took another hit, rolled the window back down, felt for the flare gun under the seat, took a second drag, and handed Cinder the joint again. She took another hit, coughed a little more, said, "Damn! That's good shit."

"It's *creeper*. It'll creep up on ya. Watch out!"

"I hate this fucking state, Julia."

"I know. So do I. Everybody comes from the shallow end of a gene pool that doesn't fork. If you take my meaning."

"Hey, incest is the best."

She giggled. The world started looking a little brighter, and she had some visuals explode in her mind's eye that were, altogether wonderful.

She saw the ruins of Aztec temples, the sides of verdant old hills that became lunar mountains as her consciousness spread all over them. She saw naked people dancing, wildly, her mind tripping out over a sudden explosion of visuals, while she closed her eyes and let her consciousness drift. She suddenly felt like she was floating suspended in the aether, letting rays of light penetrate her skin.

She was a beautiful, Madonna-like creature in his moment; floating in some undefined space beyond hope of being reclaimed by the pain, by the drudgery of modern existence. She was

covered in glittering diamonds; she was Queen of the Heavenly Spheres; she was a radiant angel that was to be adored.

But the image could not last. Had already began to evolve, and it was the one fact about drugs--at least about marijuana--that she didn't like or understand: the inability to control the mind when it was at it's most malleable and vulnerable to suggestion.

Suddenly, the images began to tilt and shift, and recombine until the wondrous mystical aspect of the imagery began to take on a darker, more debased quality.

It was the reek of shit; it was shit-consciousness that assaulted her. It was a creeping terror, a sense of her own inadequacy, of the comic figure of herself as she went about her life, confined behind a façade of ego defense mechanisms that permitted her to exist, and, rarely, thrive. But it was stripped away, and she fancied she could smell pictures, and taste thoughts.

Beautiful vistas and foggy fantasies were corrupted in the derangement of her paranoia, until all of life seemed to be summed up in the stinking image of shitty diapers, lonely, alien landscapes, and confinement in a place that seemed to be choking her senseless.

"Julia...I think that the world is made of shit. I think that we all come from shit, and stay in shit, and, when we die, we go back to shit again. But, in between, we try to convince ourselves that we are real."

"You're stoned...honey, you're getting paranoid. Calm down. Relax. Try to sleep if you can. I'll be awake until he comes back."

She looked at Julia's face, the bony contours of which seemed to explode outward into a macabre, tight, ugly-comic mask.

She leaned over in her seat and began to nod off, Julia sucking the end of the roach in trembling fingers.

Chapter 4

Bill started to walk with the gripping feeling that tonight was not going to end on a high note.

His feet clomped against the dusty road, his dogs already tired. He was sure he wouldn't sleep at all tonight. Would, in fact, spend the entire evening kicking himself about his fuck up. Oh well, he supposed that no one was ever perfect.

He looked back, occasionally, watching the headlights turn into distant pools behind him. Ahead, the road disappeared for a mile into darkness, into creaking woods, into a world that felt as coldly alien as anything he had ever known. And the mosquitoes were fearsome, tonight.

A light breeze ruffled his hair. He could not believe the way the day had derailed. He began to think, to himself perhaps, that this was, somehow, the punishment of God. Was he truly, deeply, responsible for a plot to abandon his son? Had his son become that much of an unconscious burden?

Perhaps this was God's way of dealing with him. He put his hands in his pockets and began to whistle.

"It'll be okay," he told himself, "Everything will be okay. And when we get home, I am going to sleep for about forty-eight hours. Then, I am going to get up, and take the entire family out for ice cream. And I am never going to let my son out of my sight, again. Specialist facility, or not, we are the ones best qualified to raise him. I can see that now."

Clip-clop-clip-clop--he was keeping his mind on the rhythm of his feet, trying to drown out the creeping uneasiness he felt the farther he got from the car headlights--from his family, from, at least, some semblance of security and warmth. But he was the man of the house, and that meant, well, the least pleasant duties always fell to him.

He wondered how far he would have to walk. Maybe a mile or two, he figured, but even the back roads of Kentucky had to end at some point. Eventually, the country lane would feed back into the country shire, the small city, civilization. Along the way, someone would surely be sitting in a beat up old rocker, in a

house between two hills, drinking coffee and smoking a pipe far into the night. Someone that was friendly. Someone with a phone.

He looked back over his shoulder. The headlights looked like two pin-points in the distance now, and he felt a little pang of sorrow to realize that he had to walk these miles alone. He could have used a friendly voice with him, Julia or Cinder. Both. But Bobby had to come first, and Bobby couldn't walk all this way, and so someone had to stay behind and watch Bobby and he was damn sure not going to let just one of his girls stay with the kid, alone. There was safety in numbers. Everybody knew that.

"Goddamn! I sure wish I hadn't listened to that fucking gas station clerk!"

He spat, angrily. The filthy sleazebag had given him the wrong directions on purpose; had, in fact, got his whole family stranded out in the middle of nowhere. And the gas was no good; it had played hell with the engine as soon as they got back out on the road. He was going to have to learn to be careful when it came to dealing with sleazy guys like that. He was too trusting.

"I'm going to have to learn, one of these days, that not everyone is as good-hearted as I am. Mom always told me that. Julia tells me that. I am a pushover. I am a pussy."

There was one time, however, when he had managed to put his foot down, in a way which even he had been somewhat ashamed of later.

It had concerned Cinder and a boy named Jake, with whom she had become infatuated a couple of years back. Jake was a lanky, black-haired dirt bag with a leather jacket, a swagger, and eyes that were perpetual, stoned pinpoints. What's more, Bill had learned that Jake, quite possibly, was already the father of a little bastard child that he wasn't paying support for.

Jake pushed a little reefer on the side.

Jake was nineteen and had never worked a day in his life.

He thought his daughter was seeing him more for shock value than anything else, but it was the one time that Bill, who normally let the kid get away with murder, stepped in and *forbade*

his daughter to have anything to do with the loser.

That had been a big fight. Maybe the biggest, and she had stormed her little ass out the door and down the street, and called and said she was spending the night with her friend Debra. He had sensed this was a lie, had gone over to Debra's and made sure. Then, he loaded in his car, and went cruising the streets.

Sure enough, he had found them together at a local lover's lane, had parked for a moment, unsure of what to do, then, in a heated burst, he had jumped out of his car, walked up to the little red corvette that Jake had, most probably, acquired through the good graces of his rich father, and had pulled the driver's side door open.

With one trembling hand he had pulled the punk out of the car, his daughter screaming in the passenger seat, and started to toss the skinny dirt bag (he was half-amused at how easy this actually was) against the hood of the car like a rag doll.

"Hey Man! Shit man! Take it easy! I wasn't doing nothing to her, man!"

"Daddy! Daddy! Stop it!"

Cinder was balling, hard, and for a moment, Bill had the white hot urge to just take the kid's neck in both hands and strangle the breath out of him. It would have been easy, at this point. For the first time, he realized, clearly, how simple it was for one person to go too far; to kill another human being. It was easy--just a few more pounds per square inch of pressure and Romeo would be pushing up daisies in hell. He grinned, in spite of himself.

He pushed the kid to the pavement, where he lay, half-poised to bound up and run like hell, with a look of total and complete shock on his face.

"It's cool man! It's cool! Just take it easy, big man!"

Bill looked down at him, spat, and said, "No, jerk off, it isn't cool."

He looked at his daughter. He knew she was going to hate him for this for months to come, and she would be as

embarrassed as hell when she went back to school, and had to face her friends. She wouldn't be cool in their eyes, because her daddy had intervened with her chance to score with, like, the hottest guy in town.

"And as for you: you're coming home, right now, young lady. Now!"

And for once, she knew that Daddy was not kidding, not joking, not trying to be "tolerant" and "understanding" and "liberal". Now he was being a Real Daddy. Now he was being a *hero*.

She climbed into the car, still crying, and he knew she was probably hating him more right now than at any moment in their entire sixteen year relationship. Before he got in the car himself, he turned to Jake, who was still lying on the grand, gasping in fear, and held out one accusatory finger.

"As for you: you stay away from my daughter, you rotten little thug. Understand? Don't forget this. Just stay away from my daughter. Got that?"

He nodded.

"I didn't hear you."

Bill leaned over with his fist, his mighty big fist, drawn back in striking posture. Jake looked, for a moment, like he was going to piss his breeches.

"Yeah man, yeah! I understand! You'll never see me again, I swear!"

Bill suddenly felt his anger recoil a little. He took a deep breath, straightened himself out, and said, "Okay. Great. Sorry about our little misunderstanding. Get yourself together, son. You got no business wasting your life like you are."

Then, realizing he was only the parent of one child present, he quickly turned, got in his car, and drove them both home.

Cinder sat there in silence, choking back sobs that were becoming less and less frequent.

"D-Daddy--how could you? Oh, how could you?"

He was silent himself for a moment, guiding the car along

empty, rain-slicked roads and doing his best to calm the sudden anxiety concerning his complete loss of temper. What if the kid had had a gun or something? The thought had never, not once, crossed his mind.

“What are you worried about Cin? That your friends will hate you? Make fun of you? If that’s the case...well, you have some pretty fucked-up friends.”

The last of the tears seemed to dry up quickly, except for an occasional, sniveling hiccup.

“We weren’t doing anything, Daddy...”

“I hope not...At any rate, when the time comes you’ll find the right guy. Not some two-bit druggie creep like that. Somebody good for you, Punkin. Somebody that really cares. I thought you knew that.”

She turned in her seat, and he could tell, with one white-hot flood of love, that, finally, he was starting to get through to her. Show her how much, indeed, he really did care.

“Oh *Daddy*...”

She started to tear up again, and he put one consoling arm out and drew her close to him.

For that moment, in her eyes, he knew he had instantaneously been transformed into a hero. Her hero.

And knowing that made all the difference to him in the world.

He had slept very well that evening.

The road had began to curve around, cutting into a sort of shallow, dark ravine, and trees lined both sides, their branches forming a canopy thick enough to obscure the stars, which were brighter, and more frightening than he had ever seen them shine in his life. He put his hands in his pockets, leaned against the gentle breeze, kicking pebbles and loose gravel out in front of him as he walked.

He didn’t like the look of the road up ahead. It stretched into an unfathomable murk of blackness, with occasional pools

of glistening moonlight shining against the badly-cracked asphalt beneath his feet. Still there was no sign of life. But, surely, eventually, he would be able to find a state trooper, or a country sheriff, or even a helpful, lonely old women, sitting up in her parlor, looking out at the darkness through the veil of her lonely memories.

She probably wouldn't answer the door for me anyway.

A more frightening thought would be if he was mistaken for a burglar, or something. Knock on somebody's door way out here at past-two in the morning, and you could be picking buckshot out of your brand new asshole.

No, better to just try and get to the next pissant country burg, and find an all-night diner, or flag down a patrol car. Whatever the case, he realized wearily, he still had a hell of a lot of lonesome walking left to him.

He tried to keep his mind--which kept darting back and forth between memories, dreams, and the lurking anxieties of a man walking a country road, alone, in the middle of the night--on bright and happy subjects. He found that that didn't come easy.

The unearthliness of it all hit him in one fell swoop. He realized that, for some reason, he had been cast out here to walk this lonely stretch of road to whatever end he might find tonight. His tired mind was struggling to assimilate the odd set of circumstances that had led, inevitably, to him traversing this desolate countryside in the middle of the night.

"Everything happens for a reason, I suppose."

He realized he was talking to himself. He could hear animals rustling in the bushes, and every creaking branch and blowing leaf was, suddenly, helping to build his own sense of apprehension. But he did what he could to forestall a panic attack. After all, he was a hero, wasn't he?

He was Dad.

It must have been over an hour later when he realized that he had, finally, stumbled upon Pleasant Point.

It had taken him a trek up a very steep hill, another long

sojourn through a wooded lane, and down a long, gravel strip between two weed-choked fields, but, suddenly, as if in the midst of some meandering dream, he realized that series of ramshackle, forlorn little huts had begun to crop up in the midst of his path, leaning precariously at angles which suggested they were in danger of falling over through the weight of their own rotten structures. He began to move slowly over a road that was little more than straggles of deteriorated brick, and his eyes took in the strange little series of dwellings that looked as if they had never--not now, not eighty years ago--ever been fit for human habitation.

It did, in fact, look as if Pleasant Point was nothing more than the ironic sobriquet for an oversized farmyard; albeit, a farmyard that had been left to the ravages of time and sentenced, thereby, to lie in its own accumulated filth.

“Jesus! *The stench...*”

Their was a crawling, putrid, alive smell about the place--it was the stench of an outhouse, the musty odor of rot and shit and animal vitality that some men called the “smell of nature”. But it was overpoweringly consolidated in this straight straggle of forlorn abodes.

He began to walk slowly through what, he supposed would be town square. Got out his flashlight, flicked on the beam, and began to scan the darkness in temporary, curious confusion.

There were no street signs. No signs of any kind. No signs of life, either. At least, not of two-legged life.

The houses--shacks, he corrected himself--were rotten, box-like structures that were much too small to accommodate more than an individual living in them. This place, whatever it was, had never been a town of average people.

Instead, everywhere he turned, and the entire town was divided into four small quarters by an intersecting brick and dirt roads, the suggestions was of some sort of communal asylum--perhaps for monkeys, he thought with the wisp of a grin.

Doorways were covered by chicken-wire, strange splashes of paint, mud, and other substances covered walls in bizarre,

quasi-meaningful snatches of script and gibberish. He walked over to the gutters of the road, stepped across, and examined a weird, sprawling script that covered the dusty sides of one small dwelling.

It looked like cryptic writing, scrawled by a demented child in what was, possibly, a fetid ink made of shit, piss, and blood. He moved the beam of the flashlight over it, trying to piece together what it read.

“We come...take...night...back...eat...”

There were unintelligible words hidden between, words he couldn't piece what no matter what. And this sort of scrawl littered everything randomly, moving up and down walls and across stone porches, and was carved, he could now see, even in the sides of trees.

“Who in the hell lived in this place? What in the hell happened here?”

He climbed from the little alleyway/cul-de-sac he had wandered into, and went into the center of the dirt track. For a moment, buried beneath the clack-clack sound of old tin-points and some assorted--what looked to be--chicken bones strung up like decrepit Christmas ornaments--again randomly--on trees and over entrances, he thought he could hear a brief, faint rustling. An occasional indication that something, perhaps some mange-ridden animal fresh out of food, was lurking in the darkness, out of the range of his vision.

He'll be smelling me out...if it is a dog.

This last thought did not seem to him to be very comforting, at all.

Cinder sat upon the grass, looking out at a world she barely understood. Inside, although she could not see her, she knew that Mommy was getting dinner ready, cooking and fussing and not worrying, for one moment, about how today was going to end. Mommy would be pretty sure that today would end just like every other day had for years: Bill would come home from work, put his briefcase down on the table, and give her the first kiss of the evening.

She would stop for a moment whatever she was doing, would wipe sweat from her pretty brow for a moment, would look up at him with a little sigh. She would thank her lucky stars that she had been good enough for him, not knowing that, all the while, he thanked his own false gods about the phantom luck they had, seemingly, bestowed on him. He would ask her how her day had been--had the kids been good? Had they both been adorable little angels, so overwhelmingly wonderful, so saccharine sweet that the very image of them seemed to have been drawn from the images of some third-rate television sitcom, with a perpetually smiling family living out the humdrum half-hour segments of their existence in some blissful never land, where the biggest problem confronting any of them at one time was what wacky hijinx little Dennis/Dobie/Ralphie had managed to politely bungle his misunderstanding way into?

Ah, that was life on the television, as she had understood it then. She looked up in the sky, at pretty white clouds that seemed to drift forever in a fathomless, timeless blue that was all the more horrible because it was neverending.

She would have a day, still some several years in the future, when she would meditate (albeit, in a drunken, drugged state) about the horror of a never-ending cosmic sky, a feeling of vast alienation that was so overwhelmingly crushing that it threatened the marrow of her bones and the breath in her lungs. At that time she thought about the perpetual rise and fall of the ever-dying world of nature. "Ashes to ashes", she had croaked, while envisioning a world of rotting things, of tombs stuffed with uneasy, sepulchral remains. Of the dying and rising and dying again cycle of all of existence. And, for a moment, she forgot to breathe.

But that was far in the future, in another place, and this was childhood. She sat by herself on the lawn, holding her toys over a little mound of earth she had made with cupped, dirty hands, Styrofoam cups, and a plastic toy shovel.

They were non-descript action figures, molded from the pale characterizations of some utterly unimpressive science fiction cinema epic, but to her they represented a totemic power of goodness that could be captured, like a spirit, in a few plastic details. They were voodoo dolls of heroic archetypes. But she never realized that. She snarled her nose.

Mommy had said, "Those are boys toys, honey. Don't you want some nice dollies?" But she had refused, and she had gotten what she wanted. Space commanders with phony muscles; killer robots three inches tall.

She made up dialogue for them, images flashing in her mind, images of Bobby playing and splashing in mud puddles, his feet born to the innocent, unambiguous joys of childhood at a time when he seemed never to be able to be separated from it. Images of Mommy hugging Dadddy, Daddy Hugging Mommy, Mommy hugging Cinder, Cinder Hugging Bobby...

"Hello these are my family photos. We are such a happy fam-i-lee." She stood in front of the classroom for a moment, too lost in rapturous adulation of her own more-than-perfect home, her Hero Mommy and Her hero Daddy, her living action-figures, to be aware that, as we grow, time makes fools of us all.

Gawking faces. Children leaning over desks, clapping, Teacher smiling blandly. The Fair. The Carnival. Rides. Games. Amusements. The twirl of the Tilt-a-Whirl; the sinister smile of a clown.

"Want some candy, little girl?"

Images flooded her consciousness. How could one describe, even in the throes of madness, the living death that amounts to growing old? She had sat, pen in hand, for years, trying to do this very thing: to put into writing all her most sacred thoughts, feeling, emotions and memories, but all that ever came was the same torrent of non-sequential writing that always frustrated her hopes of ever achieving anything of any creative merit. She had ideas, even snatches of the words, but she lacked something. Perhaps, form...

She moved across the hardened earth. She knew, suddenly, that something awful was about to happen. She had the same feeling, the same lost, sick feeling of dread she had experienced before, in this very spot, and for a time, she was on the cusp of becoming cognizant of something she was trying, desperately to remember. She put down her toys, stood up, and started to walk back up the lawn, toward the front door.

She pulled the screen door open, looked inside, but the kitchen was dark, quiet; seemingly deserted.

"Mommy? Daddy? Where are you?"

She walked inside. She felt a growing well of tension and sadness penetrate the thin wall of her chest, consume her greedily. She tiptoed through

the rest of the house.

It had began to look old, more ruined with every step. The soft, relaxing, fine furniture that her mother had bought had been cleared out, and for a moment Cinder thought, perhaps, they had been robbed. She didn't completely, understand what that phrase meant exactly--not yet--but she had heard it on an old cop show re-run, and she understood it had something to do with losing all of your furniture. Well, not all.

There was a broken, battered chair or two turned over. The wall paper was peeling; cobwebs were strung over the staircase; gloom carpeted everything with slants of creeping, bright sunlight and moats of twirling dust.

She began to climb the stairs. The carpeting was filthy. She went up to her room, her own room...It was as empty as all the others. More so, because the sudden absence of beloved objects shocked her with a new grief, a new sense of loss and vulnerability. She knew all the rooms would be bare.

They've gone off and left me! Her mind screamed, but she half-refused to believe it. She didn't bother at looking in any of the other rooms; she knew they would all be equally lonesome, and decrepit.

She began to cry, hard, and suddenly a squeal of tires left her running down the stairs, her heart thumping, a sob caught in the tight space in her throat. She knew suddenly, that as soon as she got down the stairs there would be something horrible waiting for her. Something dreadful. Something too horrible to deal with. So bad, in fact, that she would repress the memory of it in the back of her consciousness for as long as she would live, and retrieve it only at those odd and sundry moments when the world of dreams and nightmares permitted no censorship, no isolation of any memory or image, no matter how damaging.

Her feet seemed to be encased in wet cement, every step was slower, more, ponderous; the effort involved with simply making it back out the front door seemed overwhelming. She fought it desperately; the world had suddenly been wound-down into a stupefying, torturous slow-motion.

“Cinder!”

(Cinder was running through a labyrinth, pursued by invisible phantoms, filthy arms clutching at her everywhere,

around every corner, as she skittered on the dirt floor like a terrified rabbit pursued by a wolf.)

“Cinder!”

She sprang awake, looked at the freeze-frame of Julia, who had been startled by the steady rocking of the car. The silhouettes that surrounded it. The people that were trying to turn the car over.

Cinder rubbed her eyes blearily, said, “Is Daddy? What’s ah, ohmigod...”

She looked around. Surrounding the car were several scrawny, ugly figures, protected by the darkness, sheathed in the night. And they were rocking the car back and forth, laughing, groaning, yelling curses and threats, hammering on the hood and the glass.

The back car window exploded outward into a million tiny, glistening fragments.

Hands--rugged, hard, filthy, brutish hands that grew from the end of powerful arms--thrust themselves through the back window, and gripped her with a ferocity with which she had never been handled before. She screamed, fought, pounded her fists in futility. But it was like trying to wage war against an army of iron men. She was dragged out, kicking and screaming, a dirt-encrusted hand covering her lips.

Julia had had no opportunity to even fire the flare gun; it had been taken away from her in a split second by more thrusting hands, reaching in to claim her in exactly the same way as they had claimed her stepdaughter. Bobby had bolted awake instantly, was screaming blue murder, and suddenly he was dragged out too. It was as if they had been set upon by an army of animalistic monsters from the blue depths of some psychotic fiction.

Suddenly, a dirty cloth bag was thrust over her head, and tightened with a leather cord at the throat. She began to strangle, the cord digging into her white flesh, and she could feel her bowels give way as stars exploded behind her eyelids.

“Pig...that will teach you to scream.”

Chapter 5

The next hours of her life were a blur of pain, fear, madness, and exhaustion.

It was as if hell had descended upon them; a hell of monsters born from the pit of some nightmare; She remembered coming to with her hair a mass of blood, laying upon the filthy floor of some dark, noxious place.

Her first hours were spent fighting her way back to consciousness, groping, blindly, in the dark for some explanation. Was she dead? Was this what Hell was like? She didn't know. She felt pain consume her consciousness.

Voices. Echoes. Shadows. A light. A trickling light that only dimly illuminated what she could see around her. Cinder, her head feeling as if it had been crushed between two great weights, sat groggily up in the darkness, feeling the squish of wet earth beneath her palms.

Her eyes darted around in the gloom. Where was she? What had happened? Where had they taken her? She tried to stand up on trembling legs, fell backward from exhaustion. It was too much.

Suddenly, just above her, a light seemed to come streaming down between the slats of a wooden trap. She looked up, put her arm up quickly, and tried to lift.

The trap rattled in its frame, and she could hear a chain that, obviously, held it shut. She tried again. More rattling. But the trap wouldn't lift.

Suddenly, above her, she could hear the heavy tread of footfalls scrape across a floor.

The Bone Man entered the room, dragging behind him a heavy burlap bag littered with spare parts, bits of skeleton, and other such detritus as he had managed to find rummaging through graveyards and countryside scrap heaps.

He set down his burden, sighed, heard the trap rattle,

sighed, and went over to it, bending down and unfastening the hitch of the chain.

“*Pretty piggy...*” he drawled, and bent over into the hole, thrusting his arm into the darkness.

Cinder lunged forward to avoid his grasp, but failed to move quickly enough. A gnarled hand as strong as steel caught her by her hair, pulling her back fiercely, and hauling her upward with one arm, kicking and screaming.

It slid her across the uneven floorboards, and pulled her up until its face was directly in front of her.

Cinder screamed. The face she beheld was more of a skull than anything else; a gross, leprous portrait of malignant rot, peeling skin, and tumescent hideousness. It was perched atop a rail-thin body covered in filthy bib overalls and a flannel shirt.

“You shut *yo*’ mouth! You *heab*?” The rotten mouth spat forth a wad of phlegm into the center of her face. The voice sounded like it was being gurgled through water. Cinder continued to fight, curse, and scream. Soon, they were joined by others.

It was a motley crew from the mouth of hell; a ragged, rotting collection of deformed, twisted, jabbering half-humans that seemed to have been birthed from the fetid womb of pain. Filth and darkness followed them around as they circled her, speaking in strange mutterings, dirty lips leering over rotting gums.

Her next moments were a blur of pain, terror, and exhaustion. She was dragged, kicking and screaming like an animal, through the filthy, reeking farmhouse, and violated in ways her mind would never recover from. She fought madly, desperately, letting the animal burst forth from her rational being; loosing the beast, and crawling, with all her consciousness, back into a pit in her mind.

They had stripped her half-naked, and began to stuff bones, sticks, and fingers in her bodily orifices. She wrestled away from them, again and again, escaping the clawing clutches, only to be pulled backward through the dirt and grime and filth on the

floor. She was no longer Cinder anymore; no longer Daddy's Little Girl. Now, she was one undeniable, frenzied nerve ending of pain and terror and viciousness.

Her captors themselves were various shades of sub-human wretchedness; tattered clothing hung from their filthy limbs like soiled rags. Their heads and faces were masses of peeling skin, strange cysts, bumps, scars, tumors, and rotted teeth. Their hair was thin and wispy strands that must have been falling out in clumps.

It was as if the denizens of some nightmare institution for the mentally degenerate had been loosed upon her, to rape and kill at will. She swung out blindly with her gripping fingers, pulling back tufts of hair and cloth, but it only drove them wilder with decadent, drooling fervor.

The Leader, or, rather, the most relatively "normal" among them (although that may strike the reader as being an absurd notion, altogether, given the debased state of the motley crew assembled), kicked her squarely in the ribs, and then lowered himself, with one powerful arm, on top of her.

Even through her terror, she was still sickened by the repulsive, rankness of his breath; his mouth smelled like cheap booze, rotten teeth, and mucus. He said, "I got me an eyeful of you earlier today, *possum*. You sure are a *purty* little *thang*. *I'm a-going to give it to you like you ain't never had it...*" His heart was thumping like a drum, and his miserable, monstrous family circled him, whooping and hollering, gabbling with excitement amongst themselves.

He dripped spittle into her mouth.

She could feel his powerful arm slide down the center of her chest, to his belt buckle. She moaned, gagged, and began to squirm ferociously as he fumbled to lower his jeans.

Suddenly, she lunged forward, with an animal's fury, and sank her teeth into his shoulder with as much savagery as she could muster.

Her mouth filled with blood, but it was enough.

“You--BITCH HOG! YOU FUCKING BITCH HOG!”

He drew back in pain, and she scampered from beneath him and ran blindly across the darkened floorboards. She raked her shins against a staircase, and in panic, raced on hands and feet up the creaking, rotten steps, her hands punctured and bleeding with splinters and wood, into the greater darkness of the upper floors.

The confusion had been momentary.

Charley grabbed his shoulder, doubled-over, cursing and gasping in pain.

“We gonna kill that possum!”

“We gonna skin *that-thar* bitch alive!”

“Keep on running, girl! Ain’t *gonna* do you a damn bit of good!”

“We *gonna* feed that bitch to Daryl Wehunt!”

Cinder crouched at the top of the stairs, insensible to pain, her breath like jagged knives in her lungs. She could hear their rough stomp on the floor below. She heard the first few footfalls gently, slowly, press themselves on the bottom stair.

She scurried in the dark through the filth, like one more rat in this house of madness. She crawled blindly across the walls, fumbling in the dark, testing rattling doorknobs.

“Here pig-piggy-pig-pig-pig! C’mon back to Uncle Charley.”

Charley cooed from the darkness below, but she knew he was being cautious. She crouched and crawled the length of the hallway, her eyesight adjusting sufficiently to find a bedroom door that was partway ajar. A milk-white, diffuse illumination seemed to be emanating from within. Too quickly, she stood and opened the door, the hinges squeaking a rusty alarm, as the footfalls and laughter and mockery from below pounded their way up the staircase.

She ran into the room, slammed the door behind her.

Her eyes grew wide in shock.

The nightmare, it seemed, was not over yet.

There are primitive religions in the world, the practice of which, goes mostly unrecognized by the denizens of our modern technological society. There are primitive rites, the knowledge of which, is the sole province of men who make their livelihoods studying the bizarre aspects of tribal life that have evolved in places where modern man dares not step his foot.

Practitioners of Voodoo, Santeria, and even more obscure forms of black magic and Satanism are known to engage in shocking, blood-curdling rituals and pagan practices centered around death and pain. Even today, in the supposedly-sober and staid confines of our much-enlightened world, there are those who choose to test the limits of their own bodies, and their own minds, in furtherance of pushing open the edges of the envelope of reality.

However, nearly every example that this author can think of would pale in comparison to what Cinder beheld as she turned, seeking frantically in the darkness for something heavy enough to bar the door.

Fortunately for her, the rusted mechanism of the lock had snapped shut, barring the entrance of her captors from a room in their own hellish home.

She leaned, soaked in sweat, gasping for air, against the door, only to jump forward when the fists began pounding on the wood.

“Bitch! Bitch, open this damn door! You hear me? Don’t make us go round the other way to get at you! It’ll get us even more fired-up, girl!”

Her eyes lit upon the scene before suddenly, at last really looking at it.

It was a family scene out of Hell.

An old-fashioned davenport was flanked on either side by ornate wooden china cabinets. On the davenport sat a young couple, male and female, who must have been exhumed and placed in position after a rest of some few years. They were both

dressed in the moldering rags in which they had been buried. Long tendrils of gray hair spilled out from beneath a straw bonnet that had been placed upon the woman's head.

Cinder began to wretch. She held her mouth, coughing, choking back tears, momentarily oblivious to the hammerings and poundings on the door behind her.

Coiled between the two ghastly lovers, like some long, lovely pink ribbon, was what Cinder realized were strings of fresh intestines. Worms snuggled themselves in the hair, occasionally dropping into the dead laps with an audible, sickening rasp, to inch their way back to more satisfying enterprises. But that was not all.

On the table in front of them, floating in a yellowish-liquid she at first thought was piss, but realized must be formaldehyde, was a human fetus; it's misshapen, squashed head no-doubt still bearing the imprint of the forceps that had been used to pull it from its sepulchral womb.

On the other side of the table, laid out in lewd display were two other corpses, also that of an apparent male and female. The male was nude from the waist downward, his pants collected at his rotting ankles, and the female was thrust wide in a kind of coital rigor mortis. Their faces were badly deteriorated, but the most comical aspect was the blond wig that had been thrust onto the corpse's head, and was kept crudely in place, apparently, by rusted nails that still protruded from the tangle of dead hair.

The entire room was lit by a hazardous collection of guttering candles, which cast bobbing shadow-shows of the horror against the barren walls, occasionally illuminating the faces of faded, ancient photographs

And everywhere were bones; littering the floor, covering the tables and chairs; whole skeletons sat up as if engaged in quiet conversations, their dead jaws hanging open in mockery of the eternal moment.

She turned, tasted the metallic taste of liquid vomit project up through her teeth, and she barfed copiously over the

threadbare, filthy rug that must have, once, been ornate and beautiful. She had precious little but fluid and mucus in her stomach to void.

She collapsed upon her hands and knees, wretched miserably, her entire chest feeling as if it might pop from the wracking effort, when suddenly, through the blood pounding in her ears, she realized that all was quiet.

She looked up, her eyes darting like leaping flames in the darkness. Before her, at the far end of the room, a single boarded window looked blackly on into a night that might mean freedom at last from this seemingly wide-awake nightmare. She ran forward on trembling legs and began to pull at the boards, which had been hammered across haphazardly.

They squealed and rattled abit, but they were impossible to pull from the wall. She used up the last bit of energy she had, and suddenly felt herself go dizzy and fall into the dust beneath her.

She crawled along the floor, listening at what had now become a terrifying silence. She didn't know why, but she placed her hand along the edge of peeling, discolored wallpaper, which was hanging in large, yellowed strips in places. She began to grope along it in blind panic, her mind racing in terror and a sense of absolute futility at her situation.

Suddenly, as she thrust forward her hand, she felt a perfect square trapdoor section of the wall move back. She stopped, unsure of what to do, and then pushed again.

The sound it made was minimal, but the hinges squealed enough to make her jump. It was like some sort of doggie-door. She thrust her hand inside, and then opened it wider to see.

Finally, knowing of no other recourse, she crawled into the hidden passage, a sort of narrow space between the walls that separated this room from a larger adjoining room. She crept into the darkness, straining to see between the crooked slats of boarding that made up the partition to her right.

She slowed her breathing to a bare inaudible hiss. She looked into the trickling light that emanated from between the

boarding, and was peering at a scene that even Hieronymous Bosch may have found himself hard-pressed to conceive.

Cinder had managed to pick up an odd, jagged piece of bone, with a sharp end. She clutched it tightly now as she looked in at the scene in the room beyond the partition.

It was an altar of madness; row after row of human skulls, set atop a great flat stone that arched upward into a sort of jagged peak, carved with a strange symbol the likes of which she had never before set eyes on. Rows of candles, some of them hidden inside the skulls, some of them left to burn as guttering stumps on top, continued the surreal interplay of light and shadow that lent an extra fillip of the terrible to the already demonic display.

Set upon the altar, opened as if it was a sacred family bible, was a tremendous, decrepit book. And in front of the book sat a withered, tiny crone, that looked as if it.

In an obscure corner of the room she saw a wire cage built around a heavy wooden frame; it was the sort of coop you might keep chickens, or possibly rabbits in. Inside, was the thin, shivering form of a human being. She thought that it might be Julia, but she could not be sure. It did seem, though, for some reason, that they had chopped the hair off in crude clumps, leaving only thin, straggling wisps to frame the scalp. The figure had wrenched its miserable fingers into the wire mesh of the cage, and was clinging pointlessly to it. The box was padlocked shut.

A few shambling forms seemed to cling to the edges of the room, moving aimlessly; these did not seem to be like the others, the kidnappers from downstairs who had tried to rape her. These seemed--more deformed, or something. More frail; even disabled. But she couldn't tell very much by looking through the glowing slats of the partition.

What do I do? How do I escape? Where is my family? Where is daddy? Is he?--

She pushed such thoughts out of her mind. She had to carry forward with a single-minded purpose of survival. Then, when she could get out and get help, she would send the police

back...That is what Daddy would have wanted her to do...

She continued to inch forward in the darkness, clutching the piece of bone, unable to take her eyes off the repulsive scene displayed through tiny slats between the crude boards of the partition.

She stopped for a second.

Her breath was a tight little in-and-out suck that seemed, to her, as loud as an escaping jet of steam, followed by the rapid filling of some bellows to blow the forges of hell. Yet she tried to control herself; tried to tell herself that the key was surviving the nightmare until she woke up.

A calf was led from the darkness of the room, its hooves clomping against the rough boards loudly. It was led forward by a little, hunchbacked freak, whose clothes seemed to be hanging from its emaciated body in filthy rags. She thought that maybe it was a child; it seemed to suffer from monstrous harelip, and the skin was filthy. It was impossible to tell the sex.

She inched forward a few more paces, still keeping her vision trained at the shifting, peepshow view of events in the room beyond. She began to stumble, occasionally, over detritus; and she feared for a few moments, that this way might become blocked entirely, and she would be forced back into the room from which she had come.

Why haven't they come in after me yet? Is this some sort of sick game?

Suddenly, she kicked against something in the darkness, something that clanged; something that seemed to be filled with liquid. Her heart skipped a beat, and she felt sucked in her breath, too scared to even tremble.

Had they heard that? That had been loud. Why hadn't they heard that?

She then realized that something had begun in the next room that was distracting their attention. Several shambling, filthy forms had moved into a sort of circular position around the strange, huddled figure at the skull-strewn slab. Her eyes were,

suddenly, riveted to the scene.

The figure had been scratching into the great book, she saw, and now had put down a quill feather, dipped in what she already knew was blood. It placed the quill back into the half-skull that had been modified to use as a sort of bloody ink well, and then shambled around.

Its garb was a filthy blanket that had been crudely stitched-together, and even, she saw, in some spots safety-pinned. It could not have been more than three feet tall, and the hands and feet were deformed in the same grotesque manner as the “Lobster Boy” she had once read of in a magazine article: the hands and feet were non-existent, but the arms and legs ended, instead, in two fleshy, pointed tentacles, rendering normal walking and grasping a comedy. It lived and moved in a perpetual squat, and even more shocking, she saw now, quite clearly, that though it had been trusted to inscribe in the great book, it was quite impossible for it to see whatever it was it wrote, for its eyes and mouth had been crudely, horribly, stitched shut.

She bent for a moment on trembling legs, and examined the can. One sniff told her it was petrol. For some reason, perhaps just to get it out of the way, she picked it up, and kept holding it. A plan began to formulate itself around the edges of her mind.

There was other garbage and litter, some boxes, and more than enough darkness to make her stumble a time or two again, but still she kept her slow progress forward.

A slow rumbling chant had begun; the shambling shapes had begun to mouth strange phrases. The little lobster-man had waddled like a penguin across the floor, and out of the way.

She squinted. The cow, she now could see, was a sick and pitiful specimen, with streamers of mucous issuing from its snout, and a great, tumorous-looking body that seemed to, nearly, weigh it down. She thought it a miracle that the poor beast was standing. They pulled it closer to the unholy slab, the altar, and slowly began to circle around it, their satanic drone increasing in a kind of

mantra-like fervor.

She could see now that they were all deformed; faces twisted into snarls, mocked by tumors, missing noses, and worse deformities than even she could conceive. And there were two who seemed hidden beneath over-arching hoods, and she thought that, perhaps, they were the worst, though she could not tell.

"Ia, Ia, Shubniggurath ... Shubniggurath neblod zin. Ia, Ia, Sabbaȝios...Sabbaȝios neblod zin...Ia, Ia, Yog Sothot...Yog Sothot neblod zin..."

It was a horrifying cacophony of dismal, droning malevolence, but she was thankful for it, if only because it seemed to occupy them, and distract them from whatever noise she might make here, in the only hiding place she had managed to find since the nightmare began. She clutched the slopping petrol can in her hand tighter, hanging onto the rusted handle like grim death. She wondered, desperately, if this secret hallway might lead to a small window even, or some way to get out onto the roof, and away.

If needs be, I'll douse myself in this, and throw myself on those candles. Better that than being a slave in a cage for these freaks to play with.

The farther down she came, the greater the cracks between the boards of the crude false wall became, and more, dim, dusty candlelight streamed forward. A few feet ahead, she saw that the way was entirely blocked now by an ancient crate spilling over with refuse; on top was an odd assortment of old burlap and paper sacks, equally encumbered. She felt her heart grow cold.

What to do? Go back, and risk the bedroom again, or try and climb over and hope there was some method of escape? She felt the walls and darkness enfold her; suffocate her. She was mentally past the point of no return.

Suddenly, as the weird droning chant began to grow in intensity, she heard the heavy thud of the cow carcass hit the floor, as the animal mewled. She looked between the slatted boards, and saw emerge, from a well of darkness beyond her vision, the largest form on two legs she had ever set eyes on.

The immense body was clothed in filthy overalls, a ragged,

dark flannel shirt that looked as if it had been ripped from the body of a hundred year old corpse, and heavy, crushing boots. The hands were covered in filthy work gloves, wore thin in the fingers so that the dirty stubs of them protruded from the whiteness. The head was hidden by a burlap mask, tied with an old length of rope at the neck. In one hand he held an immense machete, the blade of which had been wrapped in a string of dried, bloodied kerchiefs.

He moved forward with a heavy, ponderous gait, his footfalls vibrating the floorboards beneath their feet. He made the sound of a mastodon when he walked.

The cow had been tipped to its side, its foul, fat belly lolling outward obscenely, as it continued to struggle and mewl. Suddenly, with a solid slice, the huge, masked being brought the machete across the cows abdomen, slicing it expertly.

Blood splattered out and began to run in streams across the floorboards, and then a great white discharge of fat slid out from the body.

The revelers went forward, huddled over and began to thrust their hands into the entrails.

Suddenly, a sound, somewhere between a guttural choke, and the screech of a newly-spanked newborn, seemed to emerge from below them. They began to back slowly away from the carcass, in a kind of blasphemous reference, and the steaming entrails were in full view to her now.

They seemed to be twitching.

They seemed to almost be slithering.

In amongst the blood, and glue, something was living. Something was forming. Something was being born.

Tiny, twisted ropes of glistening bone shot forth from the body of the dead. At the end of each, suddenly blossoming into sight like some morbid flower, skinny digits dripping slime began to twitch. The arms reached over to grip the rough boards; the fingers dug in to the uneven floor for support.

A head broke free from the moist, pulpy bladder of its

bovine womb; a cadaverous infant suddenly freed into a world that could only pray it had never existed at all. The face was a pulsating, oozing mass of exposed muscle and bone; the eyes were dun yellow pits of stupid, feral hunger.

It began to crawl away from its butchered surrogate, leaving a slug-trail of ooze and blood behind. The wet slither of its first hour of life made the noise one associated with the churning of bowels, the cutting into soft organs; the rending of fresh meat. It was a wet, dripping, organic aural oddity.

And the smell in the room had, suddenly, reached the point of being abominable.

Cinder felt her mind begin to slip in terror as she beheld the repulsive thing that seemed part fish, part snake, part corpse; The bottom half of its body was a mass of coiled muscle, looking like the belly of a serpent that had been skinned.

Suddenly, she realized that she was screaming.

And then the partition of loose boards exploded inward.

The next moments seemed as if they happened in a kind of silly, fast-forward, as if, to cope with the full nightmare of having lost her humanity, of being reduced to the point of the single, animalistic urge to survive, her mind had been tossed aside to be a mere spectator at the struggles of her body.

Tremendous hands had ripped the boards of the wall to pieces, as she stood there screaming. It was The Hood.

She felt his tremendous, vice-like grip bear down on her shoulders with crushing intensity, and pull her forward. Suddenly, reacting purely from instinct, lost in the moment of terror, she brought the sharp end of the shattered bone she held clenched in the white knuckles into his forearm, with every bit of terrified strength she could muster.

He screamed, an animal squeal that was muffled by the hood tied around his face, and recoiled away as he threw her. She went reeling into the assembly of worshipers, the gas can she had

held having been flung from her.

It rolled over onto the wooden floor, where it began to plug it's contents out in near silence.

She fell, trippingly, into the pile of slaughtered cow, fought to regain her feet, and found she was being pressed downward.

She turned, and beheld the dripping, idiot form of the reeking horror that had just been given birth, as its face slithered across her midsection, its long, swollen tongue hanging limply from its mouth. She turned, screamed, stabbed with the bloodied sliver of bone directly into the creature's eye, and heard the moist pop as the eye exploded into a dripping maw of yellow pus. The creature recoiled, it's macabre tail suddenly lashing like a spitting cobra in a frenzy of pain, and knocking an armful of the glowing candles off the altar.

Suddenly, the House of Hell was burning.

In the confusion, the beings who had assembled for this grotesque worship and birth became frenzied, losing their hoods altogether.

Cinder caught, in one brief, flashbulb-like moment, a photographic display from the freakery which was assembled around her. It was like a picture ripped from the mind of a madman's nightmare. They were hideous in their utter mutation. One entity, whose hood had fallen back from it's deranged features, looked like it bore the visage of a man who had died vomiting a terrific bird; the lips stretched around a terrific beak which jutted forth, and squawked interminable surprise. The others were even more horrible morphs between man, and death, and corpse, and beast. Smoke began to waft up from the floor as the walls and everything else began to go up like a tinderbox. The creatures, seeming as if they were unused to so portentous a tragedy occurring, began to flap about in their black robes in terror and confusion. They had momentarily forgot her, and for this she was thankful.

She dove, still covered in the sickening grue of the cow and

the creature which she had assaulted, and began to crawl toward the imprisoned victim in the wire coop in the far corner of the room away from her. Below, through the floorboards, she could hear shouting and footfalls trampling up the stairwell.

She sprang before the cage, and attempted to pull off the top, but it was closed fast. She bent low toward the imprisoned girl, and looked deeply into her eyes. She realized that her throat was covered in a very dirty makeshift bandage.

They had cut out her tongue.

She reached toward her throat and attempted to speak, only giving out a grating rasp. Cinder bolted up and attempted the top of the crate once more, but it was locked firm.

She bent down, and said, “ I-I’m sorry...There’s nothing I can do for you. You’re better off dead now, anyway. You may be the lucky one.”

But she need not have even bothered to beg forgiveness. She felt the looming presence behind her, rolled instantly across the floor, and barely missed being grabbed by an enormous, frenzied freak with hands that looked as if they were discolored and rotting from some putrefying disease.

It picked up the wire cage, and sent it hurtling through the air at her, where it exploded against the wall to her left as she recoiled into the smoke. It must have killed the girl inside instantly.

She stood, dove forward into the darkness of the farthest wall, found that the boarded doorway had been shattered, revealing a staircase that went down into pitch black. She began to take the stairs at a run, not caring if she slipped at this point and broke her neck. She was headed downward into darkness, to go she knew not where.

The staircase went downward into what she assumed must be the basement. She stumbled in the darkness, tripping over what old bones, detritus, and refuse she could not at all see. Just ahead, as she groped like a blind girl, wondering when the nightmare might

ever come to an end, she realized she was going to have to find some way out, or she would die down here as the burning ruins of the house fell in upon her.

Ahead, she thought she could, mercifully, make out a glimmer of moonlight. Her eyes began to let until things seemed to take on an ominous black form, but still a form, as opposed to being in total darkness.

She moved slowly.

She stepped forward, and kicked something in front of her.

And this was good, because she listened as it dropped off the edge of a narrow pit, and skittered down the sides. She suddenly reached in her back pocket, and felt her heart jump in momentary joy.

She flicked the cigarette lighter that had been snuggled tight against the butt of her jeans, and had stayed there through all of this.

She flicked the lighter. Just faintly, she could see the outline of a pit, dug into the center of the dirt floor. A few more steps and she would have fallen in.

A few rats skittered across her field of vision; they would have bothered her once. She could hear something sloshing in the pit, and she crept forward now, cautiously, re-flicking the lighter when she lost the grip on the plastic depressor.

She could hear sloshing, and a kind of husky, ragged breathing. She felt her heartbeat speed forward infinitely.

Below her was the most hideous nightmare she had witnessed yet.

It might once have been a man, but no more; now it was a cadaverous thing that stood below, in filthy rags, its putrefying flesh a mass of scabs and boils. Its teeth were rotten stumps in its idiot mouth, and its eyes had the dull, lusterless laziness of the congenital imbecile. In its arms it cradled what appeared to be the body of a small boy. Lazily, contentedly, it had been devouring the throat, its bloated lips glistening with fresh blood. As Cinder set eyes upon the body of the boy, a horrific realization, a kind of

dread remembering of who she was, and what had happened, washed over her in an awesome wave.

Had she been schooled in art, she might have realized, with irony, the strange resemblance the scene below her bore to the famous painting by Goya, of Saturn devouring his children. As it was, she ran around the edge of the pit, hearing the thing below stir in the slush and muck, slowly drop its prey, in favor of scaling up the slippery sides of the dirt, and investigating this interloper in his realm. It made guttural noises deep inside of it's throat.

Cinder threw herself forward, and landed nearly a sprawl a crumbling wooden shelf. She wracked her chest against it, but barely felt the pain. She scampered upward where she had fallen, sending a pile of debris flying out beneath her, and began to bang her wrists on that single glimmer of brightness, which she knew now was a filth-encrusted window. She began to pound the brittle glass with her bare fists.

Behind her, she could hear it shamble towards her in the dark, hear the slow, grunting breath, the sloshing, wet feet. It thought that it was being a cautious predator, but she knew.

Suddenly, blessedly, the tiny basement window cracked outward, filling her hands with splinters of glass, but she was insensible to the pain now, overcome with terror, with exhaustion, with a need to escape this hellish place and run as fast and as far as she could, until death or help overtook her exhausted frame. She began to pull herself up, the glass and splinters of the window frame digging into her palms, as blood trickled down her wrists. Suddenly, she felt a hand reach out in the darkness and grab her ankle.

She pulled, licking and screaming with all her might, as smoke from the burning dwelling began to waft up around them, filling the night with the blessed residue of this accursed place.

"Ahhhhhh!"

She screamed in agony. It had sunk its rotten teeth into her ankle; was clawing her clothes off, but she had already managed, with strength she had not known that she possessed, to pull

herself up and outward, her waist a mass of bleeding cuts, ground glass caught in the folds of her skin.

She kicked backward, and It continued to reach feebly out the window, clawing the smoking air, as finally, limply, she took to open ground, and ran for her life.

She ran across the open, weed-choked fields, not daring o look back, although she knew that the dread house was still burning behind her. They were not pursuing her; apparently, they were too overcome by the fire to care.

If Cinder would have looked back, she would have seen the hideous, shambling throngs of the family go out, into the night, seeking refuge in the craggy hills, the deep hollows; abandoned cemeteries, creaking, rotted churches, and old, decrepit barns. This was the way of them; it was not the first time they had been cast out, loose and alone upon the earth.

She ran through a hog-pen, her feet ankle-deep in pig shit, and for a moment she was even happy at the high, cloying reek of the manure. It smelled fresh; it finally, smelt like life.

She climbed over fences, ran through wooded patches, and down moon-lit country roads, and she never let her feet slow down. She ran till there was nothing left inside of her, until her heart felt like it might wear through like cheap tissue, and her legs felt as if they had disappeared beneath her. She lost her consciousness in that run, faded out into a kind of dark obliviousness; one might wonder if she was running asleep.

The countryside was silent, and dead around her; the hills dipped up and down in the harsh, white light of the lunar eye. Houses of creaking timbers and old mysteries settled into a country sleep. And still, as this darkness began to settle into the wee hours of early morn, Cinder ran.

Mary Bellows put on her apron, wiped out her eyes, looked in the bathroom mirror, wished she could go back home and go to bed, reached in her purse, fished around, and pulled out a handful of

cheap over-the-counter speeders. She flushed a few down her throat, took a swig of weak pop, felt sick for a moment, kicked herself in the ass, and told herself that she had to work today come hell and high water.

“Just some things you gotta do,” she said to herself, “don’t mean you gotta like it none.”

Thankfully her old man would be out on the road for the next two days. That meant she was free to have a little fun on her own time.

She went out into the dining room, liking the smell of the grill as it fired up, thinking how good that first break was going to be, sitting over a cup of coffee and a cigarette, in her own little world for a whole fifteen minutes.

She felt her speeders kick in, went back into the kitchen (which was even grungier than usual for as early as it was) , and bent down in front of a white plastic bucket for a rag. She took her time, squeezing the disinfectant and water out until the rag was dry enough to carry out to the counter, and occasionally looking over her shoulder at the cook.

He was a tall, good-looking boy; maybe nineteen or twenty. Red hair, pocked complexion, but tall; well-built. He had an eagle crudely tattooed on the back of his right hand.

He had probably been in a few scrapes.

She was interested. And she had caught him giving her the once-over, a time or two, as she bent over to wipe up a spill, or pick up some plates for the bus tub.

Hell, all men did it. But she had caught him more than once, which meant that he was either not getting any from his old lady, had just gotten out of jail right before hiring on, or he had a sex drive that was out of this world. In any case, she figured, it was time she took him home and showed him why older ladies always did it better.

He had a Marlboro popped into the corner of his mouth, as he lazily flipped eggs and sausage, dripping a few beads of sweat into the food for extra flavor.

“Hey, boy!”, she said, standing and putting her fists on her hips. “You know you ain’t supposed to smoke in the kitchen.”

He turned, put a finger to his lips as if to say, “Shoo! Our little secret”, and then went back to flipping. He was smiling.

Ordinarily, if she had caught an employee smoking while cooking food, she would have reamed his ass. But the last cook they had was a fat, sweaty little man that was every bit as physically appealing as a pile of warm manure, and, well, she was determined that now that they had a decent looking man in the grill area, she wasn’t going to waste the opportunity.

“Oh, I guess this is just supposed to be our little secret, hmm?” She said, allowing the merest hint of a suggestive lewdness to creep into her southern drawl.

His smile tightened around his cigarette, and he turned suddenly, and gave her a very noticeable once over.

“I suppose it is... You good at keeping secrets, girl?”

She smiled. She put her hand out, and trailed the tip of her finger along his forearm and traced along the tattoo to where it ended at his bicep. She say that it was a faded, curling snake, wrapping it’s tribal tail around a heart. It was really an ugly, poorly-done piece of work, but right now she didn’t really care.

“You like tattoos, lady? Huh?”

“I... I think tattoos are sexy. I got some.”

He laughed. She liked his laugh; it was sort of throaty, and soft. She felt her insides go a little watery as her pulse quickened.

“Ah hell,” he said. “I know *yuns do*. I been scooping ‘em out back here, flipping these damn hamburgers.” *And also*, he thought, watching that ass *shake around the dining room while you’re taking orders. Gives me a boner just thinking about it, mama.*

Her own tattoos were visible up both arms, and across her upper chest. They included tribal designs, an iron cross, and an eagle that was never finished, with wings that stretched over her breasts in flight.

“Well, sugar, *them’s* just the ones *you can see with my clothes on*. How’d you like to get yourself a peek at the rest of ‘em?”

He felt the crotch of his jeans grow stiff with a maddening, intense erection. He contemplated, for one white-hot moment, simply dragging her back in the storeroom and raping her.

But then she said, looking sideways out the counter window, half-nervously, "Say, what you doing after work today baby? Wanna come over, have a beer? And maybe," she put her fingers to her lips as if she was sucking an invisible joint. He suddenly felt like the Gods had smiled upon him.

"Hey," she said softly, "my old man's going to be out of town for a couple days...nothing to worry about."

He reflected for a moment: last time someone's "old man" was going to be out of town, he'd barely escaped with his skin. As it was, he couldn't afford to get into trouble. The last time he had been up in front of a judge, it hadn't been a pretty picture.

But his hardon was demanding action. And it was the one authority, in his short, bitter life, he had never been able to defy.

"Sure thing hon...Sure thing."

Out in the dining room, a few lonely truckers sat. chilled to the bone, in front of steaming cups of coffee. The rest of the dining room was pretty bare, oddly enough, except for an occasional cop, and Elmer, a man of questionable mental fortitude, whose job was to clean litter out of the gutters in front of the store, pick up trash in the parking lot, sweep, mop, scrub the toilets, throw out rotten produce, and generally serve in the lowest capacity of an already menial position.

He had once told Mary Bellows that the C.I.A. had implanted a microchip in the middle of his forehead. She at first didn't know whether to take him seriously, until one day she had picked up the old baseball cap he perpetually wore, as it had fallen from the coat rack, and discovered that he had taped tinfoil into the lining.

She supposed this was an attempt to stall of the space alien signals the government was beaming into his forehead. She started to ask him about it one afternoon, but found him picking a particularly hairy booger out of his nose with one long skinny,

nicotine-stained finger, and it made her so sick she had had to run out of the back and across the dining room into the john, where she vomited up a combination of phlegm, soda pop, and breakfast gravy.

After that, she had given the little freak a wide berth.

Becky Lou suddenly popped up in the window, demanding , “ ‘Them eggs done yet, y’all?’”

He popped a couple on the plate, handed them out, and then grabbed her by the hand.

It was slow right now. Real slow. Plenty of time. And a man had to have something to get him through the day.

Pete Martell sipped his coffee and tried hard to shift his interest to the morning weather reports. He was hauling a load to Sarasota, and already felt like he had been awake for three days straight. He had been popping speeders like a madman, but hew knew he was going to have to take it easy for awhile. You couldn’t afford to make mistakes; the highway was unforgiving. He had already had a near-miss or two in his short career as a truck driver. Everyone always told him, *third time’s a charm, Pete*.

He always thought about Jack Riley whenever he worried about falling asleep at the wheel. Jack had been a trucker for fifteen years, had carried loads from one end of America to another, and back again, and was as good a man as any at judging how far he could go with no sleep, and remain alert. Then, one lonely night, he had pushed it as far as he could go, his knuckles burned white into the steering wheel; the music in the cab blasting heavy metal. He had been popping ephedrine, but it was simply making his scalp crawl with prickles. Then, suddenly, he must have hit some kind of mild black period.

There was a man killed in the resultant pile-up; decapitated, his body had been enough to make a rookie ambulance attendant puke. Other drivers and passengers were pulled out of cars and put on stretchers. Some simply limped away stunned, holding their heads, checking to make sure their families were alright. The dead

man had been in his car, alone.

Jack had been airlifted to emergency surgery; they really, Pete sometimes reflected, should have just let him go. What he was now was somewhere between an invalid and a circus freak.

A charity organization had paid, graciously, for some reconstructive surgery, but it made little difference. Jack Riley crawled along between two canes, like some kind of goddamn crab, and his muscles--his pride and joy--were now limp, flabby white ropes; perfectly useless.

His face was, obviously, the worst. Jack had a face that looked like it had been rearranged by fucking Picasso, and then put back together with a garden trowel. It was a heavy scar hidden by stiff, unnatural flesh and a few, putty-like facial features. He looked like something from a damn Halloween spook show. He was grotesque.

They had been good buddies once; had spent many a drunken evening chasing tail, watching titty dancers twirl around the silver pole, and chugging an endless succession of cheap beer. It had been glory days.

Now, Jack sat in his filthy old house, collecting his disability checks and mainly cursing himself, the world, and the God who made them both. His yard was run-to-riot, his windows were always dark (except for the minimal blue glare of his new TV), and it got to where Pete didn't really want much to do with Jack anymore. It was just so damn hard to sit with a former pal and watch him look like hell, live like hell, drink like hell, sob like hell, and stop living.

He hadn't stopped by there in a few months, actually. For all he knew, Jack might even have up and decided to eat the barrel of that old shotgun he kept locked away in the glass cabinet in his cluttered kitchen. It had belonged to his father, and his father before him.

He sipped his coffee, looked through the paper, got up, tried to fiddle with the wall-mounted television but could only get a fuzzy channel or two, sat back down on his stool, took a look at

his eggs, thought about Jack Riley, lost his appetite, lit up a cigarette, hacked a little, felt bored and miserable, and then stared out the glass doors as the darkness gave way to the milky, trickling light of sunrise.

People had started to trickle in more and more, but it was still, oddly, pretty sparse in the dining room. Suddenly, he saw someone emerge, slowly, from the field at the edge of the parking lot. He did a double take, as the figure seemed to amble slowly between the gas pumps, like a sleepwalker or something. Suddenly, his mouth fell open.

They had secreted themselves in a closet in back of the storeroom, and she had lifted her waitress skirt for him, hiked her leg up on a couple of unused boxes, and he had pulled the biggest goddamn prick she had ever seen in her life, and then said, softly, "You like that little girl, huh? You want me to stuff your bunny with that monster?"

Actually, when he had her in his arms, all could think of was his skinny old Aunt Lola, and what it had been like the first time he had fucked her. He actually preferred girls just shy of thirteen or fourteen, but he had a raging monster full grown in his jeans, and now it had to be sated. He leaned her back against the wall, and she braced herself, and then he popped it in as hard as he could, leaving her gasping and moaning.

"We gonna have to be quick about this girl! C'mon!"

"Oh fuck yeah! Oh fuck yeah! Oh, *jeezus*, oh baby--YES! YES! YES!"

She began to rock back and forth with his bucking thighs, the boxes beneath her ass shaking, and she reminded herself that they had to be quiet and quick. God forbid the owner should come in right now. God forbid.

Becky Lou was starting to get backed up up front, and was wondering just what the hell Mary and the new cook had disappeared to, and what the hell they were doing. But right now she was too busy scratching out orders from increasingly steady

flow of people that began drifting, like some sort of sudden gust, through the glass doors.

“Okay, hon, so you want eggs and bacon...check. And you want those eggs scrambled or over easy. Hum? Scrambled, okay. And you want hash rounds? Okay...”

She thought to herself, *Where in hell is that bitch at? Disappeared with the new cook. Well, whatever the hell it is they're doing, they better hurry the hell up!*

Pete looked out the glass doors at the trickling light of dawn, awash in the gray sky like the early morning headache after a long night's drunk. Then, he saw something move at the edge of the parking lot. A thin wisp moving slowly on the corner of the tarmac. He rubbed his eyes, looked closer; thought maybe he was seeing a ghost.

All of a sudden he stood up, moving quickly to the glass doors, and partly opening them, looking out.

Pete had served two tours in the 'Nam, before being sent home Section 8. He had crawled his way through a psych ward or two to make it where he was now, and where he was now, he knew, wasn't great. In Vietnam, Pete had seen things that he hoped to never see again in his entire life: child whores, the aftermath of a brutal gang rape, severed body parts laying fresh beside a trickling stream. He had seen men that had become animals, and men that had been reduced, through torture, to a point where they seemed like they had disappeared down the black hole of man's hopes and fears about the human condition. He stared at the white wisp that was shambling, slowly, toward him; he thought, for a moment, that he was having a flashback.

She looked like the walking dead. Her face was filthy, her clothing torn; her hair was matted to her blood-streaked forehead, and she had the faraway look in her eyes of someone that was going to need years of intensive psychiatric treatment. Pete had seen that look before, and it never failed to raise in him a feeling of almost primordial angst and horror.

“Girl?”, he found himself calling out, standing in the

doorway, before he even realized what he was doing.

“Girl! Hey, girl, are you?--”

She simply continued to shamble forward, near the point of collapse. Another shaking footstep, and she fell into a clump on the pavement.

He turned, suddenly yelling for the waitress to call an ambulance, and then started out the door. Two sheriffs, both of whom had been sitting on break at a corner table, suddenly got up and followed him out. They went outside, turned her over gingerly, and felt for a pulse. One of them was already on the radio to dispatch, and was assured an ambulance was on the way.

Becky Lou, who had stopped working for a moment herself, and had been watching over Pete’s shoulder, felt she knew exactly what had happened to the girl, and raced into the kitchen again, yelling, “Hey Mary, come on out here! We got some girl out here’s been *raped!*”

Curious, she stepped into the back hallway behind the kitchen, and heard moaning and shuffling coming from behind the walk-in closet where they kept the dry goods. With half-a-smile curling her lips upward, she grabbed the handle and pulled the door back.

She laughed; it was a scene, exactly, as she had expected.

The new cook was buried to the hilt of his massive member between Mary Bellows’ skinny old, white thighs. She was sitting atop a rapidly crumpling pile of boxes, and his skin-tight jeans were down around the tops of his cowboy boots. Her own waitress uniform was hiked up to her waist.

They both turned, with startled looks on their faces. The comical thing was, was that he couldn’t stop thrusting, but merely continued to the inevitable explosive orgasm that was building to a crescendo in his loins.

Becky Lou laughed loudly, said, “ Well I suggest y’all hurry the fuck up, because we got some girl just collapsed out here in the parking lot, and an ambulance is on the way.”

She then slammed the door, turned, and went out in the

dining room, all the time thinking about how , unless she wanted all two hundred and fifty pounds of her drunken, mildly-psychotic trucker husband to find out what she had been doing at work this morning, that that bitch Mary Bellows was going to be real nice to her from now on. *Real* nice.

Part 2: A History Of Horrors

Chapter 1

She had been at the hospital for such a long time, she could barely, now, remember what life had been like before.

It wasn't, of course, a proper, hospital: it was really just an old house that someone, long ago, had decided to renovate for the purposes of keeping a few, a handful, of mentally ill inside. Within the confines of those long, dark hallways. In the corridors of madness, and babbling, that was where Cinder was now.

It had been, finally, the decision of the State as to where she had ended up. The judge had leaned long over his gavel, his nose a wintry point of dispassionate jurisprudence, and he had intoned, but not sharply, that “young lady, we cannot credit your story, nor do we have an explanation for any of the vagaries of your case. We do feel that, as a ward of the state, you should be confined to the care of Drs. Childless and Lament until it is deemed you are in a fit and proper state to care for yourself. Until that time, I have no alternative but to remand you to the custody of the Holloway House. Court is adjourned.”

The gavel had ringed down upon her life, and her mind had reeled a little bit as she walked out of the courtroom. Elizabeth had been with her, her special friend from the State Sanitarium, and she had said, “They say wonderful things about Holloway House, Cin. Really. I'm sure they can help you--on an individual

basis--with the kind of special care that you need, that we just can't see to at State."

She had turned to look at Elizabeth as they both stood out on the courthouse steps, in the trickling sun of a world that was vanishing around her ears. A world that was threatening to swallow her whole, if ever a world could. Well, damn it, they had made their decision, and she must trot along to the beat of a tune she wasn't aloud to sing.

She had gathered a few meager scraps of belongings, a couple of books; even a mental hospital room can hold found memories to the uprooted, and she had said her good byes to what staff she could tolerate. She reflected, as she was driven out into the country, out into a world that had spit her up last year, undigested, and unsure of just who or what she was supposed to be, that she was--essentially--just a quiet little dot. No memories. No richness. Just a vague recollection of something terrible that had occurred long ago. Something involving pain, and loss, and screaming...

She had blocked it out of her mind. It was better that way, wasn't it? Just block it out and let it ride along, somewhere in the subconscious, waiting beneath the layers and folds of the brain. Like an agent. A sleeper agent in a terrorist cell of her own being. Would she never remember her identity?

The backseat of the car was separated from the driver by a thin wire screen, but she knew they didn't consider her any kind of a violent risk. She was, often, relegated to the role of imbecile, anymore; but she had made friends with Elizabeth, and Elizabeth knew that that wasn't right. Had found it out in deep conversations which had lasted for hours into the night.

She remembered those conversations with the pretty young therapist with a deep sense of yearning. Elizabeth was yearning too. She was unhappily married to a man she didn't love. Didn't even particularly like, anymore--and he had become, she suspected, a cheat. Cinder remembered the night, in the confines of her hospital room, when Elizabeth had embraced, had held

each other, and suddenly, began to kiss. Elizabeth had run her hand up the cool side of Cinder's leg before she realized what she was doing, and the kissing had become violent, impassioned. Cinder didn't even know what a "lesbian" was, but she knew that she liked this. But before it went any further, Elizabeth had turned away from her, had picked up her clipboard, and had begun to shake somewhat convulsively. She then stammered out that she had to leave, and Cinder did not see her very often after that.

Pity.

But Cinder was use to being left alone. It was the way the world treated you, when you couldn't even remember your past> She had no real past. No home for memories to rest in had she been able to even recover them. She reflected that this made her, in a strange way, free. She had no suppositions about the past that would interfere with what she wanted to do in a year, a month, a day. Now, every day could be a process of discovery, and the world might never be the same for her twice.

Holloway House was a grim, gray structure that like of which had probably not been built in over one hundred years. It was a vast, sprawling, limitless, edifice of brick--three stories high--with a seeming multitude of wings, additions, abutments, and crawling over the face of it all a kind of stonework one never saw outside of the grand old architecture of a bygone era. It would have been, if not for the shroud of perpetual weathered gray that seemed to envelope it, a remarkable, even unearthly, feat of achievement. And, of course, the windows would be made of Plexiglas, and barred. Also, as inaccessible as the place proved to be (and, she noted, it was set quite far back from the main road, in a twisted maze of dirt road cum driveways that veered into a variety of sheds and barns and additional storage places) it was surrounded by the obligatory barbed-wire security fence. Electrified?

In the front seat next to the driver was Mrs. Renault, an old French bitch that liked Cinder as much as the average person likes an ingrown, fungous toenail. Mrs. Renault, however, had not the

slightest ounce of courage, and therefore, pretended, that she was the number one rung of support of a steep ladder that had first been crafted by the State Hospital. Also, she spoke English with only a minimal accent of French, and no dialectical difficulties whatsoever. So much the better, thought Cinder, to be able to tell the old bitch off right before she climbed back into the hospital car for the ride home.

"I told Dr. Elmer that you wouldn't require a police escort dear. He was vary wary, but I told him we never have a problem with you anymore, and that, besides the lack of your memory--your, am-nes-i-a--that you had recovered sufficiently to be a part of the normal routine of things. Oh driver, you must let us off at the main entryway."

As if he didn't know that. Bitch.

The main entryway was a beautiful set of glass doors with a fanlight, but obviously reinforced and possibly impossible to escape out of if locked. Cinder had begun to note these things from a very early age. After all, her memory stretched back a little over a year. All she had known in that time was the low wail of the mentally ill, the sterile whiteness of ward walls, and the frenzied speech of those who muttered silently to an alien god that only they could feel in the pits of their souls.

Many men who had been forced to take up residence in the state hospital had whispered to her furtive things; secret things. Plans of escape. Fantasies of what they bloody well wanted to do to the Head Nurse, to Dr. Gunard, to their own mothers. They had taught her some secret things. There were fantasies of freedom too desperate for even the ears of the sane world.

One had tried to rape her.

He had failed. Miserably.

The staff had begun to make sure she was kept far away from over stimulated, sexually undernourished, and completely unrepressed males. After all, a patient assaulting a patient in an "expert facility" was an unheard of and intolerable incident, and it didn't look like poor Mr. McKuen was ever going to be able to

piss the right way again.

But now here was Holloway House, a less repressive, less sterile environment, but a mental facility none the less. Judge Akne was not just going to let her go to some damn inner-city tenement house for ex-druggies and prostitutes. Not his girl. No. This one had been a star patient, had made it into the news; was, in fact, a celebrated item, hot on the list of superstar fringe personalities, celebrated on tabloid tee vee and in tabloid pages. **THE FORGOTTEN CHILD...WHO FORGOT HERSELF!** Headlines screamed while satellites beamed. She had no past: speculation created one for her. She vaguely remembered being in a dark place where people were killed. Of a-a-a horrible man...and a good man...and a little boy. But they all must be dead, and no one knew just who in hell she was or what had happened to her or her people.

She sometimes made up a fantasy family. Dad, and Julia, and little brother, er, what's his name. The cripple, or something. But she knew this was as unreal a dream as the real world was a nightmare. The records had been combed for the missing; the files had been searched. Posters went up in department stores. She was outside; she belonged to no one.

"Come on now, dear, let's get you checked in and inside. And get you comfortable, and get your things put away. There's a good girl."

The driver (a large black orderly named Bonafacio Tyrone Collins, who was as friendly and subversively insubordinate as the day was long) said, "Yess'm", and got out, and let Cinder out of the backseat. There were no door handles back there, she noted again, with bland and knowing amusement.

"C'mon, honey, " he said. " Let's get ya'll inside fo' missus have herself a little fit."

Cinder smiled. She liked Bonifacio more than any other orderly. She would miss him.

Cinder got out, reached in quickly to grab her luggage, and began to follow Mrs. Rennault up the weather beaten stone steps.

The glass double door swung open easily, one of them on each side, and Cinder walked on through.

The inside was deeply carpeted, the walls were a mild, sedative shade of paneled brown, and the front desk was an immense oval of formica straddled by a collection of phones and a stray computer or two. This was the modern world. There were leather furnishings, a wall-mounted television in one corner, a soda machines, candy machines, a magazine rack, and to top it all, the first few straggling patients she would lay eyes on that day.

One was a horrible stooped woman with a great bulb of a nose and skin the color of cooked liver. She was missing more than one of her teeth. She approached, said: "They aren't not let the likes of young heathens in here, and harlots, and prostitutes, and jezebels, for, saith the Lord, all are detestable in the sight of--"

--"Betsy, you need to go and take your seat. Hi, my name is Rachel. I'm going to do your physical and then we'll have Becka show you to your room and get your toiletries and get you all settled in. Your name is...*Cinder*. Am I correct?"

Mrs. Rennault stepped forward, held out her hand, shook, pursed her lips, gabbled for a moment in a soft voice with the obvious Nurse, and turned, saying, "Well, Cinder, it looks like this is it, eh? We must say our *adien* now."

Mrs. Rennault had started to reach up in a cold, stiff little hug, her arms held in a bizarre, plaintive outreach, her movements stifled by her drab overcoat, when Cinder suddenly pivoted, turned to Boni, and flew into his arms. She smiled Boni was warm; lovely.

"Take good care of yo'self honey. I might come and see you real soon."

"Thank you," she whispered, choking back tears.

As she slipped from his huge grasp she realized, with a deeper, all-pervasive, helpless sorrow, that he was fighting tears, too. She turned, and accompanied the nurse, Mrs. Rennault fizzling out in her mind like a smoldering ugly little flame.

She was shown to her a room, a spacious, if somewhat dull little rectangle comprised of bed, bathroom, and washbasin. In addition, not much furniture, There was a long wardrobe, cheap, and the walls were stark white, there was also a peculiar long mirror to one side. She supposed this was so they could watch her dress and undress.

“Now, you will be on suicide precautions for two weeks--it’s a mere formality--so I’ll have to take your shoes. I’ll get you some slippers. You’ve missed lunch, so I’ll have the kitchen send up a tray. Hmph,”

Nurse Rachel lifted her little luggage onto the bed with a tiny humph, began to paw through Cinder’s scant collection of items; this was something that she was long accustomed to, and it bothered her not in the least.

She had seen little of Holloway so far, except for a few long, carpeted corridors, but already she had managed to get a sense of the place deep inside of herself; she seemed doomed, at this strange stage in existence, to suffer the company of the forlorn and forgotten. She could feel the oppressive energy of madness stifle her breath, accompanied by what must be the strict and heavy-handed regimen of the place. It was another asylum, no better, really, than the last one. However, she would have to make the best of it.

Nurse Rachel helped her put her things away. Cinder could see, already, beneath the thin veneer of Nurse Rachel something nasty and stiff, something unwilling to share in the simple delights of humanity that other people took for granted as part and parcel of being alive. The cheekbones were pulled taut; the eyes, the large blue, merry eyes, betrayed not a hint of wrathful impatience beneath their phony smile. The hair was Aryan blond, the color of straw, and overall Nurse Rachel, she considered, was quite good looking.

Young. Pretty. She’s the kind you have to watch out for.

“Well, it looks like your all settled in for the moment. We may need you to fill out some paperwork later, and of course,

there is the physical. And, also, Dr. Elmer will want to speak with you personally. He speaks to all the patients personally.”

She smiled. She had a singsong quality to her voice that was as fraudulent as a counterfeit dollar. She clasped her hands together in front of her, trying to look cheery and Christian. The gesture was lost on Cinder.

She stood there, quietly, her body feeling the inner pulling that it had always been tormented with. She reflected, for a moment, that there was, seemingly no difference between herself and the slightly-older woman in the nurses uniform who now stood there, inspecting her, looking for tell-tale signals. They both had all the requisite essential parts to adapt and move through life.

But there is a world of difference. And I know it, Cinder thought sadly, and plopped down on the firm little mattress.

“Thank you.”

“Yes, well...hope you get settled in okay.” And with that, and a sort of cold little laugh, Nurse Rachel had hurried her skinny behind out the door and down the hall.

Cinder looked toward the window. The sun had decided to make it's face known to the trickling gray afternoon, and now a sustaining beam of sunlight, holding within itself a world of dancing dust motes, fell upon her face.

It hypnotized her. She reflected that the sun was not really the sun, but a massive life-giving star. Much the same as the wild array of stars she had stared out her window at when she was an inmate at State. Those stars had chilled her. Those stars seemed to be so many dancing eyes, strewn across the dark firmament of time in hateful, alien array.

I think I really am losing my mind this time.

She shivered.

She realized she was alone.

The medical examination had entailed a painful, humiliating probing by a gloved woman with immense body fat and few teeth.

“Ahh!”

“Sorry, hon. I guess I don’t know my own strength. Stick your tongue out. Breathe for me. Lie down.”

Cinder was in a lime-colored room with tiled walls that seemed, on the whole, somewhat less sterile than any examination room she had ever been in. There were the few required anatomical charts on the wall, including a grotesque cross-section of the human head that would, most probably, have been more in place in between the covers of some lurid “fringe” magazine devoted to experimental rock or serial killers. Nurse Bertha Maddox hovered over her in her immensity, a great gross woman that must have weighed on the high-side of four hundred pounds.

Her lips had been painted a fine ruby red, but they had roughly the approximate shape of a pair of old inner tubes, and the nose seemed like it had been twisted by some malignant designer of human forms before the world was created. Cinder didn’t even want to guess what each individual breast must weigh, but she knew collectively it must have been staggering.

“Just a mere formality is all. Have to do it. Make sure you ain’t got bugs or something.” Nurse Maddox carefully peeled off one latex glove, stepped on a silver pedal, and plopped it into the top of a shiny aluminum wastebasket that was, as far as Cinder could glimpse, filled to the brim with similar used gloves.

She lay her head back and wondered what sort of medical facility failed to regularly empty the trash, but as she had no memory for comparison, she let the thought slide away with all the others.

The Nurse waddled over to her, told her to take off the rest of her clothing, and coldly handed her a thin blue hospital gown. She would not be allowed to dress in “street wear” for at least two weeks.

“Suicide precautions, hon. Put it on.”

She was escorted back to her room by a large orderly with a slate-like, frightening face and a sullen demeanor. She thought his name was Jeff, but she couldn’t be sure. She entered her room, spied a tray on her nightstand, took a seat on the bed, and lifted

the lid. She realized, suddenly, she was famished.

It was hospital food, maybe a little better than what she had a State, but right now she could have made do with tar paper. She tore into a slice of ragged beef, sopped up gravy with her bread, ate the instant potatoes and even the peas, which she hated. She even drank all the juice and the coffee. Her head seemed to be clearing a little.

As she ate, she realized that, next time she would be expected to join the others in the dining room. The thought did not cheer her. As orphaned from her past, from all knowledge that she was, she had an instinctual grace when she ate, a sort of genetic manners that was not shred by her mentally-unsound kindred. In short: eating with the insane was not in the least appetizing.

Again, she peered out the window, feeling inside herself a strange lost pleasure, a private rumination upon the solitude of her existence that was all her own. She felt she could look into those beams of sunshine as they cascaded across the face of Holloway House, across the well-clipped lawn and rolling hills and clots of trees, and she wondered if she could lose herself in all that glorious light.

And then, as she ate, she realized that she had begun to cry. Real tears. Slipping, lazily at first, down her smooth cheeks, and wetting her new hospital gown. At first it was a grief that she couldn't register; it meant nothing and had slipped upon her in much the same way as a virus will infect an unsuspecting host. But her nourishment grew cold in her teeth, and her throat filled with tightness, and her chest flagged as she fought to recall a memory that was buried, somewhere, in the annals of her sleeping brain.

She continued to eat around the sobs. In an institutional setting, one learns to not waste what one is given. But she couldn't waste the release of grief, either.

Doctor Elmer was an unimpressive little man with a limp, and a round, serious face. She thought he looked vaguely turtle-like, but

she kept her mouth shut.

“Well, now, Miss, how are you finding our treatment of you so far?”

She looked away from his eyes. She couldn't seem to stand them. They were somehow just a little too bulging; like the eyes of a fish. And they were terribly red.

“Fine. Everyone has been very good to me.”

Doctor Elmer leaned back in his leather chair and ran a hand uncomfortably over the bottom half of his face. He was portly and compact. On his desk was a model sailboat. On his walls were paintings of the New England Coastline. His office was carpeted, his shelves were bulging with dusty volumes, and the smell of some pot potpourri spray or incense was heavy in the air. She realized, for the first time, that there was also some subtle music, just beneath the level of hearing, being played on the intercom system.

He looked at her a moment suspiciously, his jaw resting between his thumb, middle and index fingers.

After a pause, he stated abruptly,

“You've noticed the music, then?”

She nodded, and smiled uncomfortably.

“Yes. What is it?”

“Oh, ah, just something to soothe you. To soothe us all. This music of mine is playing all over the building. But it takes a special, attentive person to realize it. Tell me: do you find yourself to be a special person. Attentive?”

His manner seemed strange, but she said, “I don't know. I guess, the fact that everything is so new to me...I mean, well, you *know* what I mean.”

He smiled, a look that did not become his face, and leaned back in his chair. He looked rather arrogant at that moment, like he was surveying her from his throne, and she could feel his strange bulging eyes dance over her form. He leaned forward again, opened the thick manila folder on his desk, shuffled some papers inside, seemed satisfied, closed it, tapped his fingers on the

desk, leaned back again, exhaled, and said, “ We are going to have to do something about that blockage, Cinder. That is your real name, I assume? Or at least it’s the only one you can remember. It says you were found wandering down the highway last year, hysterical. You had hurt yourself, or, somebody had hurt you, or -- but what does it matter? You seem to have no independent power of recall. The authorities have failed in every attempt to identify you. It’s as if you just walked into our lives from some other world.”

She started to speak but thought better of it.

He continued, “What you do remember is very confusing. Very confusing...” He leaned forward again, thrust open the manila folder, said, “It says here, ‘...extreme traumatic stress, dissociative disorder, no known relations...moody...introverted. Sometimes violent...” He thrust his head up suddenly and asked, “Are you going to be violent with us?”

She looked down. There had been several violent episodes, culminating in the wounding of he inmate that had tried to rape her, but she had managed to quell the beast months ago, and she was not even considered an escape risk any longer.

“ No.”

He paused, said, “Well, good, Cinder. Good for you. We run a tight ship here. And we don’t take kindly to inconsiderate guests. And you are our guest, no matter what you may think. Hm. I’m going to prescribe something new. It’s tricky, but we’ve had incredible success with it.”

He reached into his desk and took out a prescription pad. He began to scribble, all the while talking.

“You’ll learn to like it here. They all do. Every one of them. Holloway House is a top rated facility in this state. We have our problems, I will admit, but we just keep improving with age.”

He tore off the sheet and leaned back in his chair. His bulging eyes considered her a moment. She winced. There was something about his gaze she--most definitely--now realized she couldn’t tolerate.

“I am an old hat at this sort of thing, Cinder, I am an-an-*expert*, if you will, on the subject of the human mind. Nothing fascinates me more than that lump of cauliflower between your ears. We have to get it working properly. We ALL have to keep our mental warehouses in order. These,” and he patted his left temple with the tip of his finger, “are the repositories of our so-precious consciousness. And consciousness is all there really is. Tell me: do you have any experience with hypnosis?”

She nodded. She had been hypnotized by a man they had brought in, back when she had first come to State. He had brought forth some confusing items, but it wasn’t anything she had wanted to deal with, and upon awakening from trance she had done the best she could to quash it back beneath the layers of forgetfulness again.

It had been memories, incomplete memories, of dim people she knew as if in a dream. And there had been pain, and torture, and there had been murder. It was like a trip into Hell itself.

He huffed, leaned back again, eased out the center drawer until it rested against his bulk, and withdraw what seemed to be some sort of crystal suspended upon the edge of a chain. Suddenly, she felt the tedium of the interview lift. It was an exciting little thing to look at, for some reason. She could have sworn it flickered in different colors, but she knew it couldn’t be more than a trick of the light.

“Yes. Yes, dear, sweet girl. Dear Cinder. I want you to look at this little crystal of mine. I want you to focus on this crystal of mine. Focus. Focus. Now, I want you to imagine I am showing you something you will never get to see again as long as you live.”

Chapter 2

The history of Holloway House was long and strange.

Built one hundred years ago by an eccentric heiress, who

believed, wholeheartedly, in the pronouncements of every cheap medium who could catch her ear.

Her chief adviser in this respect was a small, crippled woman, of Slavic extraction, who claimed to be a relative of great gypsy seers that traveled from one godforsaken end of Eastern Europe to another to escape persecution. The woman, Madame Zemindar, was prone to go into fits of babbling and convulsion at times, when her spirits deigned to make an appearance. On several occasions, the spirits had commanded Mrs. Holloway to donate a considerable amount of money to one of several bank accounts held secretly by Madame Zemindar.

It was fortunate for her, we can suppose, that the spirits were so inclined to watch out for her personal welfare.

Mr. Holloway was, himself, a very well-to-do gentleman: having made his money in the manufacture and sale of munitions for the Army, he had reaped a fat wallet during one of several conflicts of the past quarter-century, and was, to put it mildly, a "gentleman of some means". He was also sadly indulgent of his hysterical wife, whose matronly manner repulsed him, but who he tolerated out of habit, and, we can suppose, a sort of cringing love.

It was 1873 when the spirits, speaking through the enigmatic Madame, first bade Mrs. Holloway that she should siphon off some of her vast, personal fortune for the building of a stately home in the foothills of Kentucky, on a mound of hill once sacred to a lost tribe of Indians.

It had been a sitting of some repute, and even Madame Zemindar had seemed thoroughly shocked when her Red Indian control had, suddenly, vanished, and been replaced with another spirit. An unfamiliar spirit. A powerful, loathsome thing--although she never let on to the circle that this was the case.

Mr. Chelsea had been there with them, and Mr. Bigington, who was from England, and thought who, secretly; Spiritualism was "a lot of bloody nonsense". And Mrs. Piper had been there too, seeking to question her Great Uncle Waldo Pepper about

where he had left a particularly important family heirloom that could no longer be located.

Madame Zemindar had felt everything happen as it did normally, at first: the spirit seized her, sent chills across her back, and, even if the transmission was only a faint one, she could use her considerable skills in acting, sleight of hand, and outright fraud to take up the slack. Whatever the case, she made sure she always gave her sitters their money's worth.

Mrs. Holloway, always an eager, breathless sitter, sat holding hands with the others; her large eyes closed very tightly, her milk-white marshmallow flesh very bright and cold above her stiff black collar. She could feel her heart race. Suddenly, Madame Zemindar seemed to twitch a bit, squeezed her hand tight, and said, "There is one here who would like to speak with Mrs. Holloway."

Madame Zemindar was nearly half in trance, but she could tell, with a little inward smirk, that Mrs. Holloway's pulse had jumped, could feel the quiver in her hand that told her the woman was half-mad for some spiritual message, some proof of the survival of the soul; of the beneficence of the "invisible world". Madame Zemindar once reflected, while living out her last days in a very nice home she had purchased from the proceeds of all her séances, that out of all the people she had performed for in thirty years of mediumship, there were none so kind, so generous, so obsessive, and so damned *gullible*, as Mrs. Horatio P. Holloway.

"Yes? Yes? Is it Mother? Is Mother here with us? Oh, please tell me it is Mother!"

Madame Zemindar almost squawked. The spirit currently possessing a very large fraction of her conscious mind might be anything from Mephistopheles to the Angel Gabriel, but it was definitely *not* Mrs. Holloway's mother. However:

"Yes, dear, it is I. I have come back from this side of the veil to give you a warning. A very dire warning..."

Mrs. Holloway seemed enraptured. For that matter, even that foul old Mr. Bington (whom Madame Zemindar had had

to insist extinguish his cigar before the séance began looked for a moment, more than slightly amused. His facial expression was cocked somewhere between a grin and growing wonderment.

Then IT happened. The one incident in her thirty years that Madame Zemindar had not planned, nor had any careful control of. She never experienced it again, nor did she ever want to. It had damn near done her in.

The lights went out for her. She found herself floating in a black void, surrounded by fluttering, brilliant cloth.

In the séance room, she bolted from her chair and began to thrash upon the floor, while from her mouth issued a streamer of sickening, mucus-like substance. The sitters suddenly bolted from their chairs, save for Mrs. Holloway, who clasped her hands together, her eyes still tightly shut, as if in fervent prayer and exaltation.

Mr. Bington produced a leather wallet, and attempted to jam it into the mouth--

--"She's having some sort of bloody seizure! She'll swallow her tongue! For god's sake Chelsea, give us a hand!"

Just then, the candles that had dimly lit the room were extinguished in a vile blast of wind that came, seemingly, from nowhere. Moans and strange yatterings seemed to float on the very air, and the noxious streamer of ectoplasm that had sidled like an afterbirth from the mediums lips had begun to crawl across the carpeted floor, while strange phantom glimmerings danced and coalesced in the darkness, sometimes assuming the shapes of human faces calling out for help; sometimes more hideous, indescribable shapes.

The ectoplasm moved like a fat, slimy serpent to a far side of the room, and to the astonishment of all, began to stretch upward inch by inch, and grow until it assumed the vague shape of a man--an exceedingly tall man--with a voice like a hissing adder.

Zemindar still lay on the floor, yet she had ceased to move; she was caught in some rigor mortis of agony, her face turned a

pitiful and repulsive green and her eyes gone completely white. More foam and vomit began to issue forth, and in his panic, good Mr. Bington still had the presence of mind to turn the poor woman on her side to keep her from choking.

The strange hooded figure strode forward on dripping, glowing legs, and said, in a sepulchral din that seemed to be gurgling water, “ You must build... for us a house...A place, for the ones... who have been killed...Because of your husband and his dealings...You must do it now. Or...soon...You shall pay with both your lives.”

It was a hideous thing to behold, looking like a giant, shimmering figure of molten wax. It seemed to drip as it walked, and pieces of itself fell from it's forearm as it raised its finger to point. Yet, noted Mr. Chelsea amazedly, not a piece of this material survived the séance.

Finally, it finished, “We will be with you always...and guide you. Do not fail us! WE ARE WATCHING.”

And with that Mrs. Holloway promptly fell over, a and joined Madame Zemindar on the rug.

The candles re-lit themselves, the strange, glowing, flitting phantoms dissolved, and the hooded figure in dripping white vanished in clouds of strange fog.

Madame Zemindar was ill for a number of weeks afterward; shaking, puking, coughing, gagging, gasping ill. She didn't know if she would ever recover. Mrs. Holloway, to her credit, stayed with Madame Zemindar all those long, terrible weeks after ward, waiting on her hand and heel.

Mr. Chelsea quit the munitions business altogether, opened a series of children's hospitals and orphanages, began a mad study of the occult, and donated a considerable sum of his personal wealth to a Spiritualist colony in Indiana. He died well-loved, and sadly missed by those who loved him in life.

Mr. Bington, whenever asked by his several biographers about the incident, merely snorted, and said, “Smoke and mirrors.

‘That’s all it was. Mark my words: smoke and mirrors.’”

He eventually sailed back to England, wrote twenty learned volumes on Etruscan pottery, ran for Parliament and lost, was fond of sitting in his study, smoking his pipe and wearing his tasseled fez, and raising exotic birds. He died an obscure figure, and nobody today appreciates the long hours he spent studying Etruscan culture.

Of course the house had to be built; of that there could be no question. Mr. Holloway was quietly indulgent, but he was often nervous about the vast amounts of money his wife was Spending. And the new home was in an inaccessible place, on top of a tall hill, in the middle of a backward county where everyone was genetically related to the moron living a mile down the road.

He would sometimes make mild protest, but his wife would have none of it. No, the Spirits had spoken. No, there was no point in arguing with her.

Several crews were hired for the job, all consisting of sturdy men led by a foreman who could barely comprehend the blueprints as they were being drawn up, night after night, by Mrs. Holloway, Madame Zemindar, and a quack architect named Holfgren who, among other things, was wanted in New York on charges of fraud. He was a prolific cocaine abuser who much enjoyed the vast sums he was being paid to transform the spirit’s instructions into workable building plans.

The house was never finished. In fact, never would be, for the spirits had made the sly suggestion that, upon the completion of the edifice, that her husband and herself would be called “beyond the veil”, and would no longer be able to occupy “these empty vessels of existence”--referred to commonly as bodies.

Day after day, month into month into winter, the strange edifice of dreams and nightmares began to take shape, exploding outward onto the jutting hill and covering the surrounding grounds like some misshapen fortress. Brick was laid and wood was hammered and sawed, and wagons came and went, and an entire encampment of workers had sprung up like a garrison of

soldiers near the front lines of some impending battle. Money was no object.

No object, that is, save for in the eyes of Mr. Holloway.

Mr. Holloway began to grow violently cross about his wife's building plans. He had never liked that "gypsy wench with her crystal ball and her vague mutterings", and he liked the fortune he was spending even less. He had not been at the séance when the spirits themselves had commanded the building of Holloway House, and, even if he hit probably would have made little difference. He was skeptical, hard-bitten old man, and knew ever cheap trick in the book. But he was also loyal to his wife.

Several months later, during the winter and after he had begun to stress more and more that "for Heaven's sake Jane, just let them complete the damned place. I'm sure your spirits don't want the crew to go on building forever," M. Holloway began to grow ill. Steadily, violently, and worsening with each passing day, he took to his bed. Doctors and specialist came and went, but his only recourse, beyond morphine, was the company of his poor, deluded Jane.

She daily brought him his gruel, his "medicine", and a loving smile. He would reach up in the midst of his delirium and misery and touch her smooth, round face. His Jane; the only one in the whole world he had ever loved. Often a single tear would trickle down the side of her cheek, while he lay there, weeping and moaning. She gave him what comfort she could afford.

He died quite suddenly. There was no inquest. There *was* a lavish funeral, with business partners and a few political comrades, and several of Jane's closest friends, and a few curiosity seekers. All assembled could not help but notice how strangely serene the widow Holloway looked. She hadn't let a single tear drop from the side of her eye during the entire service.

At one point she had approached the casket, laid down a bouquet of flowers, and considered the face of her late husband. "Ah well...it isn't as if there is any such thing as death anyway. We'll meet again, my dearest."

And with that she sat down in the chapel pew, as strange and solitary a figure in black as anyone present had ever seen.

There was, almost, some trouble with a local tribe of Indians, who insisted the ground that was being built upon was sacred to their people, and, despite what the white man's spirits had told him, should not be traversed by anyone not of the tribe.

The tribal representative and several braves came riding in one day, armed--a bold move in an encampment of white men who hated Indians. The foreman, and Mrs. Holloway, and then Holfgren, all tried as best they could to settle the dispute in one day, with no trouble. Finally the elder was invited to dinner, and, not surprisingly, it was Madame Zemindar who managed to convince the mystically-inclined Raven-Who-Takes-No-Flight, that all men worshiped, in essence, the same Great Spirit, and since the Great Spirit had commanded them to build this house, they were powerless to do otherwise.

Finally, after a sitting, Raven-Who-Takes-No-Flight agreed that, indeed, there was powerful magic involved. He promised that he would speak with the elders, and asked that his people only be allowed to use the land from time to time for certain, vague ceremonies that no one present fully understood.

However, in light of their need to keep the peace, they agreed wholeheartedly to his request.

Year after year, decade after decade, the strange building grew and grew. It's construction was now a central facet of the economy of nearby Bath, and not a few old men in later years recalled, with some fondness, their own turns as construction workers on the "Holloway House of Horrors", as it was now commonly referred to.

A more professional company might have kept track of accidents and fatalities at the building site, but after twenty years, and a lengthening list of unusual occurrences, it was a wise man that managed to compile them all for posterity.

They included typical accidents: men falling from scaffolding, sometimes to their deaths. There were a countless array of cut and mangled fingers, broken appendages, illness, fights, foulness, and dysentery, common among any group of men living in harsh conditions for weeks and months at a stretch. And there had been two decades of men come and gain, and come again.

Occasionally, a horse stampeded and threw a rider, someone got bit by a wild dog, or a wagon overturned up the side of a muddy hill. Common.

But there were *other* happenings, stranger occurrences: several men vanished, leaving all their belongings, even their money. Murder was suspected, faintly, but dismissed. All of them had been well-liked; none of them had any known enemies in the camp, and their would have been no motive outside of robbery. It was a matter quietly dismissed.

Men reported seeing lights floating about the hills at night, “ghost lights”, and some men spoke of a tall, black, bear-like figure in the bush, with glowing red eyes. Some men quit their jobs and refused to return, for fear of “ha’nts”; the rest trudged on, their need for money greater than their fear of any supernatural folklore then circulating amongst the camp.

There was an outright murder. Near the turn of the century, a large Dutch immigrant named “Slater” had grown incensed, for an indefinable reason with a man named Franks. To this day no one is sure what the fight was about, whether a slight real or imagined, but, whatever the case, the result was the same: Slater stabbed Franks to death in a fit of drunken rage one evening, several yards distant from camp. He had attempted to hide the body in the hollow of an old tree, and, upon returning to camp, had quietly retreated to his tent and fell asleep.

The body was sniffed out by dogs later, but the animals must have already been at it, because the corpse, besides the plethora of knife wounds, looked as if it had been partially *chewed*.

Slater went to the gallows, forever protesting his innocence.

To his credit, all the evidence against him was entirely circumstantial, and no one ever found the eight-inch blade that he had used to murder Franks.

But that is a different story.

By 1900 the house was livable, and Mrs. Holloway occupied it with an ever-dwindling staff of servants. By this time, Madame Zemindar was a very old woman, a very rich old woman in her own right, and had suddenly taken up roots and moved to the far-sunnier climes of Florida, much to Mrs. Holloway's dismay. Mrs. Holloway substituted Madame Zemindar with a series of less-than-satisfactory replacements, including one jittery old bird that called himself "Swami Yogananda", who was as much an Oriental as Mrs. Holloway was. Instead he was a thin, neurotic little man from New England with a habit of never bathing, eating with his bare hands, and going about the house stark naked at the oddest hours of the day. The servants, to be mild, hated the sight of him.

The edifice, which had finally nearly bankrupted even the vast economic resources of the Holloway fortune, was completed by default; when the workman realized they would not be paid promptly for the labor, come winter of 1901, they threatened revolt, violence, and arson. Mrs. Holloway, in turn, threatened to use her political contacts to call out the Army, if necessary.

The result was simply that she, her small staff, and her great, hulking fortress were left in the black hills all by their lonesome. The final result of the building project was a vast, crepitating castle straight from the pages of a Poe or Dunsany.

The servants would not stay; more often than not, just the feel of the strange, lavish home was enough to drive them away. The hallways that intersected, maze-like, and headed towards dead-ends; the doors that opened onto empty space; the odd, non-Euclidean geometry of the walls.

And, then, there were the spirits.

Mrs. Holloway had, in her life, one of the great collections of occult volumes the world has ever seen. She was quite proud

of it. Thousands upon thousands of volumes, rows of shelves lining entire walls, in a library that occupied a half-dozen rooms.

Beyond, in an alcove with a false door--made to look like a book case--was the entrance to the séance room. At this point however, Mrs. Holloway was tooling in the extreme end of ritual magic.

The small, octagonal room was painted vividly with scenes from, it would seem, Dante's *Inferno*: hellish figures, twisted in pain, bizarre celestial apparitions, macabre, snarling grotesquerie, and, of course, demons were all painted upon the walls in a crude fashion by the hand of an unknown artist. Presumably, he must have once painted banners for the carnivals, for at every turn one was reminded of the parade of oddities one would associate with freak shows.

Here was her private, very private, collection of occult paraphernalia, much of it very exotic, expensive, and imported from distant lands. Here African gods stood side by side with Persian demons, massive dusty grimoires from the forbidden collections of French, German, Italian collectors who, for whatever reason, found it more prudent to part with their beloved objects than hold on to them as slavishly as Mrs. Holloway had.

Here was an altar that had been constructed by a heretic monk in the seventh century; here were pentagrams, hexagrams, runic inscriptions, strange diagrams, machinery of an indefinable purpose, the material riff-raff of minds that had dared look into forbidden spaces time and again.

Here were her crystals, her collection of tarot decks, her totems bought for liquor from Indian shaman that had assured the white woman that they were keys to power, portals to the wealth of the unconscious psyche. Any visitor that would have happened into the room would have been, first, awed by the sheer bizarre nature of the assembled bric-a-brac. Then, they would have been chilled to the marrow, for in this strange, octagonal room, of every room in the house, a person--even a skeptical person--could feel the creeping cold and sense of isolation, the

odd and subtle distortion in the temperature of the environment, and smell the strange dead smell that seemed a little like dead roses and whiffs of sulfur combined.

Servants spoke grimly of the library and the alcove séance room; not many remained after being confronted with strange knocks, bizarre voices that seemed to emanate from everywhere, and nowhere; weeping women who disappeared as soon as you approached them. And of course, the legendary “hairy-man” that haunted the woods around Holloway House, and who, swore a Negro cook named Etta Crabb, once looked in at her as she stood by a kitchen window, its blazing eyes glowing with hatred for god and man. The kitchen staff mostly deserted Mrs. Holloway.

For twenty years she lived nearly alone in that dreary old place, advertising for help, hiring the first thing to come along, and then watching helplessly as they fled soon after, giving scant notice. Her once grand fortune had been depleted to such an extent, because of her building, that she was forced to sell Holloway Munitions for a sum large enough to support her the rest of her days, but not large enough to put her in the satellite of high society again. She became a relic: an obscure oddity, cared for at times by a Nurse plucked from her dwindling list of contacts, and a few loyal blacks who subsisted on what she paid them for what was, mostly, a futile effort to try and make repairs and care for the considerable grounds. Also, there was George Raven, an Indian who shared her passion for the pagan, and sometimes shared her bed. But George died in a hunting accident, and Jane Holloway just seemed to go on and on.

Finally, there were days and even weeks when she saw no one. Her Nurse had long since passed herself; the blacks moved farther north, to Indiana, Ohio, Michigan--she stayed alone, while the world grew up, changed, evolved, and left her in her macabre crypt. Even her powers had dissolved.

There were no more psychic flashes, no intuitions, no calls from spirit. She would have even welcomed this, but even the ghosts had seemed to desert her.

She would sit in her personal magical chamber for hours, in the darkness, waiting, listening; hearing only the sound of her husky breath. Nothing. Was it toying with her? Was cruelty its only form of delight? Where had she gone wrong?

She would sit on the upper floors staring out at the window, staring past the trees and down the hill and out toward the lights of Bath. A small town was growing up there, she realized, and leaving her behind. She began, finally, after many weeks, to hear the voices of spirit again.

Kill yourself. Come. Join us.

No. No, I won't.

C'mon. Kill yourself. It is Heaven here. And we have all of eternity.

No! No! No!

The house grew more vulgar, fell into a greater state of filthiness and disrepair. Often she would walk around the house in her ragged old dresses, her hair a wild, tangled mess, and talk with spirits, exhorting them to help her, to lead her.

Cans of food littered the halls and dining room; they had been opened and often eaten cold, with the silver spoon left sticking out of the top. Trash of every variety seemed to clutter in corners, and, she managed to put things in such a state of disarray that the house-her mansion--in time began to resemble the sordid dwellings of some filthy vagrant. No one called anymore. No one at all.

She failed to empty her chamber pots; she collected newspapers, bits of cloth, old magazines, bent nails, wooden spoons, dead flowers, tin cans, dirty bottles, and junk, junk, junk...filth to such an extent that, later, as her body was removed from the place for its final showing (at a funeral attended by three warm bodies, including, amazingly, the incredibly old Madame Zemindar, who made her final journey from her sick bed in Florida for the funeral), one man commented, "I've never seen anything like it. We found forty-four jars of urine in that place. Things I can't even describe. She had been living up there like some crazy hermit for who knows how long. Nobody knew."

The townies did know though; she made the trip into town, in a once-grand “tin lizzie” that had fallen to rust and was barely operable, once a month for supplies. She spoke to no one, made no friends, and was regarded as an “old kook” and, an “old witch”.

She was laid to rest in 1930, but the most shocking chapter of the history of Holloway House was still to come.

Her personal possessions were auctioned off to pay for her massive debts; she had, apparently, been barely scraping together money to keep the creditors at bay for years, and in her last years, was months in arrears on a variety of different payments. The auction, held in Louisville, attracted people from diverse places, curiosity seekers, and not a few individuals who had heard strange whispers concerning the private collection of Mrs. Holloway. Some of them looked to be Arabic or from the Far-East.

Tongues wagged and legends grew. The house stood vacant, its boarded-up windows peering into isolation and gloom like some bizarre sentinel stationed on the borderland between reality and delusion. Its porches began to sag; its roof caved and leaked, and it became a weather-beaten reminder of a tragic woman's fate.

The property changed hands several times; each owner suddenly found himself, for a variety of reasons, too “spooked” by the dwelling to keep hold of it for long. A few, reportedly, met with strange, even bizarre “accidents”, and one man vanished out of his bed at night, with his wife laying next to him--and never returned.

But there was one man who, after attending a land auction where the Holloway House and property was up for sale, thought that the building would be, absolutely perfect for his own purposes. His name was Dr. Harvey Lee Phogg, alias Harvey Lee Warren, alias Warren T. Cross, alias Fred Duggan, alias Fred Frogg, alias, *ad infinitum*. He paid the princely sum of fifty thousand dollars, which he considered a real steal. He paid for it with the insurance money he gleaned from the death of one of

his eighteen wives--seven deceased, eleven living in various places, one in England.

He was not an actual doctor, but he had studied forensic medicine a great deal, as well as burglary, financial fraud, counterfeiting, rare poisons, abnormal psychology, disguises, and whatever else he could to further his aims in the world. We repeat: he was not a *legitimate* doctor.

He had also studied business with the crafty, beady eye of a vulture, and he was keen to use the bizarre, massive house for the purposes of business enterprise. Namely, he was intent on opening his own resort hotel for the rich and idle. Most everyone thought the good doctor was just a little nuts.

They were gracious in the estimation of his level of sanity.

Again, workmen were seen scrabbling over the face of the abandoned relic. Various teams of architects and builders were hired, fired, went unpaid, were handed bad checks, funded from mysterious bank accounts when the heat became too strong. The strange building grew stranger; it was filled with cheap furnishings, electricity was added, and, most especially, gas.

Upstairs rooms were converted into spacious, if somewhat plain, bedrooms, and the library was refurbished (though nowhere near its former grandeur) with a large number of leather-bound volumes, most of them various sets of cast-off encyclopedias obtained for pennies.

It was at this time that the tennis court in back was built, and Doctor Phogg even put in a makeshift movie theatre, with a number of comfortable leather seats and a wide canvas screen. He had his own personal collection of films he like to view in private, of course; stuff he had picked during his tenor as "Professor Max Marvell, Lecturer in Anatomy", at a cheap, grubbing carnival. Those films were the "blow-off" for the crowds of eager male yokels who would pay a little extra to see a "forbidden picture": a sex film. He had the blackest collection of them he could find, and he had even worse things. The sorts of films that are destroyed by police departments after being used as evidence.

He realized that dining was going to be more difficult to come by, but he had contacts in New Orleans, a colored hooker named Dion that would, gladly, serve as a cook if he paid her enough. He smiled behind his little curling moustache (he was tall and good-looking and mustachioed in the manner of silent film villains): his guests might not like dinner, but most of them wouldn't be around long enough for desert.

His final death toll was seventeen, although many true crime historians place the number slightly higher. Full-page advertisements had been taken out in the *New York Times*, among others, and Dr. Phogg had managed, slowly, to attract a few wealthy clients with his stated offer of a "rustic weekend resort".

Once the guests were settled in, they immediately began to realize something was amiss. Only a scant handful of rooms seemed livable; the rest of the building was, largely, in a state of rampant disrepair. And there were only one or two colored servants. And the food was *terrible*.

Dr. Phogg was careful to be very selective as to his choice of victims. He would pick off only the most elderly, or the very young and impetuous. The local coroner could be bribed into falsifying a death certificate, and the fate of the deceased was twice put down to suicide, three times to heart attack, and several times to "misadventure." Of course, whatever money or valuables they had brought with them became immediately the property of Doctor Phogg, under the pretext of settling the hotel bill .

Travelers lured in cold from the open road were given a heavy discount--and killed the same night.

Bodies could be disposed of down a wooden garbage chute that led into the basement, where Dr. Phogg did a small side-business in pulling gold teeth, harvesting organs to sell for research, and performing hideous experiments with pet cadavers. Several times he had tried, unsuccessfully, to complete an act of necrophilia with a fresh female specimen, but found that he couldn't quite accomplish the task.

The luckless decedent could then be disposed of in a vat

of nitric acid, and the sludge would be mixed with quicklime to dissolve the stench.

(It was in this basement laboratory, incidentally, that Dr. Phogg first heard the strange series of scrapings that alerted him to the possible presence of some unseen force, just beyond the moldering masonry. He knew, full well, that the foundations of this house rested atop a series of deep , largely unexplored caverns that stretched on for miles, and might lead even into the center of the earth. The possibility--coupled with the mysterious scratchings-- inflamed his scientific thinking up until the very end.)

The unraveling of this criminal enterprise was unspectacular--no sleuthing genius ferreted out the specifics of the various crimes, although there was an increasing suspicion in several quarters, and a lackluster detective had finally come, under the pretense of being a traveling businessman, to stay for a few days and investigate. Before he could make much headway though, an unfortunate occurrence brought his investigation to a rapid close.

An explosion in the sub-basement laboratory, due most probably to a leaking pipe and a lit Bunsen burner, brought the local fire department calling. The building was not, incredibly, engulfed, but the damage to the lower floors was extensive, and firemen poking their way through the ash and rubble were quick to discover pieces of human bones and remains, stolen goods, a system of gas pipes whose sole purpose could only be to asphyxiate the guests in their respective rooms. The flow of gas could be controlled from a series of valves in Dr. Phogg's office. Dr. Phogg, by the way, had managed to momentarily slip from view.

He was found later hiding in the surrounding woods, holding a clasp bag full of stolen and counterfeit currency, and a large bundle of documents relating to various and sundry criminal business dealings.

He was hanged after several months of astounding jail

house interviews and sordid courtroom revelations, creating a national furor of interest that died as suddenly as it arose. Before his final walk toward the gallows, he swore that, barring an immediate and swift sentence of eternal damnation, he would do what he could to intercede with God on our behalf.

Holloway House stood vacant and abandoned again for another decade, its cloak of gloom and dilapidation snuffling out whatever life had once been lived and celebrated there, and whatever secrets crept within the dusty confines of its long, troubled history.

Chapter 3.

Cinder walked on clouds through the hallways, barely aware of the hulking orderly at her arm.

She felt as if the hallways were a thousand miles long; the doorways seemed to recede into bright pinpoints in the distance. Words were spoken to her, but they were like the dragging of tires, or an old, warped phonograph record played at half-speed. She realized they had stopped by a window where a very ratty-looking nurse had given her some pills, and then she had been led, swaying, back to her little room. The sunshine was very bright, and the diffusion of its glimmer as it shined through the window seemed to lend an almost ethereal glow to the hallways. She was taken to her bed, where immediately she collapsed, and could feel her mind sway upward, journeying to places where minds were not, usually, accustomed to go.

She was running in the dark tunnels again, voices moaning and screeching around her. She felt as if, at every corner, there was someone waiting, lurking, ready to pounce upon her frame and devour it. Glimmering colored lights flashed on and off in her mind, her mind of minds, as one vision faded into another. Now, she could see some people: Mother, Father, Brother--they stood in a kind of angelic repose, as if modeling for a painting of the celestial realms. Faces smiled at her; mouths opened and closed. Arms held her; she wanted someone, was searching for something that she could

never, again, hope to find. Then there other images, images of blood; torture, terror, and mayhem. A hulking, feather-covered absurdity with claws for hands seemed to be chasing her through some lightless maze. A woman stretched out on a wooden rack, a headless man laying in a puddle of dripping gore, and a boy--a poor crippled boy--skinned like a cat in a filthy bathtub. And these images assaulted her consciousness, in a rapid-strobe of psychic attack, as she lay upon the bed in delirious apathy.

Days faded into each other; Cinder was fast-losing any grip on herself. Whatever medication she was being given was wiping away the tough, rebellious surface of her being. She was being slowly simplified, she knew; but there was some comfort in this.

Walking was an effort, and every long hallway at Holloway house seemed twice the length as she crept down it, a frightened mouse, unsure of where she was, or what was happening.

She ate her meals mechanically, not caring, even, for the foul manners of those who slopped and slurped around her; one mouse-like woman with a very bad set of stitches on her forehead, lost most of her food down the front of her hospital blouse. At one time, this would have revolted Cinder, but she simply continued to chew the bland food as mechanically as she had since they had first given her the meds. Her mind was flowing outward into a long tunnel of its own design. When spoken to by Nurse Rachel or any of the other colorless, constantly-shifting staff members, her typical response was a vague, droning reply.

Most of the day, anymore, was spent sleeping, staring off into space, or simply trying to recollect what she had seen in those strange, terrible visions, when Dr. Elmer had first hypnotized her. What had those images meant? She couldn't let herself be dragged down by them.

Even the act of reading was too much, and, she also noted--still had the presence of mind to note--there were no current magazines or books available.

She spent several hours, one day, simply trying to become interested in an article in a 1976 issue of *Better Homes and Gardens*.

Her mind kept trailing away though. Did people actually live in houses like that in the real world? She didn't know, but she did know that, if they did, she would almost certainly never be invited to join them.

Family...I use to have a family, I think. But I can't think about that, now.

There were few recreations available to the twenty odd residents of Holloway House; staff mostly left them alone for long, dull, merciful periods. Everyone apparently was on a similar drug. The average conversation never lasted beyond a few moments.

When "talkatives" were admitted (and some occasionally did come in), they spent maybe a day blabbing about their horrible family backgrounds: abuse, rape, abandonment, homelessness, poverty. Cinder listened with one ear. She had heard it all before.

In a day or two they had their medications, and their dialogue dried up.

The sun rose. The sun set. Activities were planned by Staff. Cinder painted a few half-hearted sun catchers and brooded. She decided she may actually have died and gone to limbo.

During the afternoon periods, when the Staff retreated into cubby-like offices and did whatever it was they did that was considered so important, so secretive, there was time for Cinder to wander into places she, most probably, was not supposed to go.

Her own ward opened up on the first floor landing, looking out over the huge central entryway and the Receiving Desk. It was occupied by Cinder, and a few rumpled disastrous women who were vast mental incompetents, and, in some cases even physically disabled. Cinder noticed there were plenty of empty, adjoining rooms, always locked, and she realized that this was, most likely, where they secretly observed the residents from time to time.

She had already realized the long mirror in her room was a two-way.

Observation is a critical part of the treatment here, she had been repeatedly told. But did they have to watch her get dressed and undressed? Did they watch her sleep? It was enough to drive you into paranoia and madness, not cure it.

But she did manage a considerable amount of wandering; Staff were, curiously, unconcerned about some aspects of how the patients at Holloway House spent their time. Cinder had walked, in her now slow, slightly swaying manner, past the receiving Desk, catching only a slight, scurrilous look from the nurse on duty, and had wandered back into the dining area. She could hear the whoosh of a sprayer and the clank of trays and silverware being washed. To one side was the dim, carpeted room with the wall-mounted set where they ate all of their meals, and to the other was the kitchen. She could hear heavy, black voices talking loudly, and she ignored them.

She tip-toed down an adjoining corridor off the kitchen, a slim, pretty little ghost in a heavy white gown that was not, altogether sure what she was looking for. The hallway seemed to a thousand miles long, and was damned hot. She tried, curiously, the doors, and they were all locked> She walked further down into the darkness, leaving the kitchen sounds behind her, and the barking, jocular voices erupting in laughs and slang.

The corridor ended in a t-section, and she went left for no particular reason. She continued, lazily, to twist the handles of various doors. All locked. Finally, she came to the end of the hall: a wooden double-door of immense age, with sectioned glass that would have seemed more appropriate in a Victorian sitting room. In the midst of these yellow, painted institutional walls, it seemed as surreal as a flower planted in concrete.

Dimly, she realized this was a holdover from the original building, and she put out a few fingers and pushed. Amazingly, the door slid open easily, light cut through the darkened hallway, and Cinder entered what, to her limited mind, seemed to be a room as vast and sacrosanct as a temple.

It was a high-ceilinged room with oak paneling, heavy

beams criss-crossing above, and the furnishings, what furnishings there were, seemed luxurious; even antique. High-backed leather chairs and deep, plush sofas shared space with handsome little desks and quaint, long tables. There was even a magnificent globe.

But it was the massive shelves, stuffed to overflowing with books, that really piqued her interest.

An old-fashioned library. And we are not allowed to use it.

She fought down a moment of anger. They were rare, but they did occur, specifically when she felt that somehow, her rights were not being taken into consideration.

She walked over to the shelves and began to examine the titles. After a few minutes, she realized, full-well, why it was the patients were never allowed in here.

She read the titles to herself:

Funeral Customs.

Witchcraft in Legend and Lore.

Sexual Deviation.

The Cycles of Izar, Satan and the Occult, Demonic Possession in Primitive Cultures.

Necrophilia and Sadism: A Study of the Limits of Human Depravity...

On and on it went. It was as if the Doctors (and she had only met Doctor Elmer and a woman Doctor named Zeena. The “expert facility” certainly did seem to be short on doctors.) had scoured the face of the earth in search of obscure books on black magic and ritual murder. It gave her chills. It was like something from one of the horror novels she used to secret away for reading pleasure, when she was at State. Boni use to give her the things when he was done with them, reminding her to, “Make sure ain’t none of these bitches know I’m the one who gave ‘em to you. But damn, if *I* was trapped in here all day, I would want something more exciting to read than *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*.” Well, Boni would have himself a field-day in here, she thought. Suddenly, she came upon a volume that seemed even more unusual than the others, It was a great read book of unbelievable age, and bizarre

gold leaf on the cover. At first, she wondered if it might be some ancient copy of the *Koran*. Boni had told her about that book too, but he had never given her one. Although, often, he would exclaim, in a half-jest, "Praise be to Allah! I am victorious!"

But the book was in some language that she couldn't understand. Inside, horrible pictures portrayed a man laid out in a circle, his hands bound, while a number of robed characters shifted around him. Some of the characters...demons, she corrected herself, seemed to hold pincers, and instruments of torture. She felt icy fingers trail up her spine.

"Strange, huh?"

She spun around. She was not alone.

She turned, dropped the book, felt her heart jump into her throat.

Standing before her, in scruffy work clothes, as large and beautiful as the day, was a woman with the kind, hard face of someone who knew life from the bottom up. She was standing next to a custodial cart, and Cinder realized that she had become so engrossed in the library volumes that she had not even heard the double doors swing open.

"I, ah, don't think that you're really supposed to be in here, but I won't say anything this time." The woman shifted her piercing gaze away from Cinder for a moment, to the massive shelves of books.

"Isn't this place great? I think that little wet fart of a Doctor *owns* all of these. Part of some investment scheme."

The two women stared at each other for a long, interminable moment, and then Cinder managed to peep out,

"M-my name is C-Cinder."

The older woman (she was maybe thirty) smiled, ran a muscular hand through her thick, chin-length black hair, and said, "Well, you better not let them catch you in here, girly. I imagine that Doctor is pretty secretive and stingy with *this* particular collection." She walked toward Cinder, her boots chomping the

hardwood floor, and Cinder realized just how incredibly strong this woman must be. Physically, she had the body of a brick-layer, and her skin was a tawny brown that evidenced a life spent working and playing under the sun, as much as possible.

"I'm Suede," she held out a hand, and Cinder took it, shaking a little. The woman's hand was big, rough; the palm was dry and raspy. Cinder could feel the strength radiating out from the palm, and it made her feel very good.

"I know, I know, the *name*--but, you see, my parents were hippies. They joined the Krishna. I grew up in a carnival. I use to work as a private detective--did you want the long, or short version?"

The women were immediately friends.

"Why would he want all of these strange books. They're..."

"They're creepy, dear. Yes, I know. Real voodoo shit. If you asked him--if the State came for an inspection, found this place, and made some fuss about the books, he would probably give his official explanation as being that it was a research library for the study of schizophrenic and religious delusions...I think the weird old duck just gets his cookies off collecting the stuff. He must have spent a fortune. You know there's, like, a whole *subculture* of people that collects obscure books on black magic and other weirdness. I was in here the other day for some reason, and I just found laying open on a table a book of crime scene photographs. Stuff from like the Roaring Twenties. Real sick stuff."

Cinder said, "I don't like it in here."

Suede cocked her head, looked at her a moment and said, "Funny you should say that. Neither do I. You don't really notice it at first, then it starts to mount; a spooky feeling. A lost feeling. Do you believe in ghosts?"

Cinder shook her head.

"Well, we have them here. This building has some kind of history. A lot of legends. It was built by some kind of cult or

something a hundred years ago. A lot of creepy shit has gone down here. People have died--right in here.”

“Oh, c’mon!”

Cinder was beginning to warm to the woman.

“No, it’s true: the Army use to use this as a hospital during World War Two. They brought the mental cases here then, too. Guys that lost it out on the battlefield. Guys that couldn’t deal with killing anymore. Anyway, they brought them here. And well, from what others have told me, they have had more than one patient, you know...”

And Suede trailed a finger across her throat.

“Anyway, ask any of the other janitors, or the kitchen help: sometimes you hear footsteps in here when there aren’t supposed to be any. Weird moans. Things get moved around. Hell, Lennie said he was driving home one night a friggin UFO or something followed him all the way out to I-70. Scared the shit out of him. And, ah...I was cleaning the offices downstairs one day, and I heard someone walk right up behind me. Turn around: nobody there. Pretty fucking weird, huh?”

Cinder shook her head in agreement.

“But don’t ask the any of the nurses or their pet orderlies: their all bitches. Even Nurse Rachel, and damn, I don’t mind saying, but that is one fine looking woman...mm. Oh, yeah, I guess I didn’t mention--”

And Suede giggled. In a moment she was joined by Cinder, and two women sat one of the long tables, and became quick friends.

Suede Leonna O’Donnell had lived an interesting life.

She had been born in Michigan to a devout Catholic family that was determined, or so she claimed, that she would either grow up to become a Nun, or the wife of a lapsed Jewish dentist willing to convert.

“Instead I shocked the hell out of them, told them I liked combat boots instead of high-heeled shoes, and got my first

tattoos when I turned sixteen. I like the girls. You don't mind, do you?"

Cinder shook her head.

"I've had another woman come onto me before. I've kissed another woman, if that means anything." She quickly added, "I liked it."

Suede leaned back in her chair and considered. This could develop into a deep and grievous personal boo-boo if she wasn't cautious.

"Yeah...well, we probably shouldn't discuss that. I mean, I have to be careful. I do work here, you know. In fact they probably wouldn't like me just sitting on my ass jawing with a patient, would they?"

Suede smiled, for a moment, the smile of someone who was familiar with her own shortcomings, and almost resigned to suffer them. Cinder said, "I hate this place." Flatly.

"It doesn't surprise me. This place is...weird. I dunno. It's strange, even by 'nut hatch' standards. "She lowered her voice, leaned over the table a little, said, "I don't think this place is run very well, do you? In fact--"

Suddenly she stopped.

"In fact--what?"

"Nothing. Anyway," she said, changing the subject with a flick of her hair, and a wary turn of the eye, "I have to be careful, you know. I mean, you seem cool, but appearances can be deceiving."

Suede narrowed her gaze for a moment, said: "You also look strangely, *familiar*..."

Cinder shook her head yes, said, "I was in the papers. You've probably seen me in the newspapers back when they use to run my story. I was in the tabloids and paper a lot a year ago. I-I have amnesia--psychic shock, was what Doctor Lament at State called it--I was found wandering a country road outside of Shelby Heights. I have no memory of anything, er, or, well, I have a *vague* memory...but nothing before that. I dunno."

Suede looked sympathetic. She said: “Do they think it could be some sort of abuse, or something. I’ve heard of things like this: people who suppress memories that are too much for them to handle...Have they tried hypnosis?”

Cinder didn’t like to think about the answer to that, but said: “Yes. But not much luck. I don’t like hypnosis at all. It always makes me feel really weird for days afterward.”

There was a strange moment of silence where the two women just sat looking at each other.

Then Cinder asked, “Is all that stuff you told me true--I mean, about growing up in the circus and all?”

Suede became boisterous, “Well hell yeah! But it was the carnival, dearest. Not a circus. Mom and dad were hippies. Then they were Krishna. Then they were carnies. Then they got Catholic again. It was a long, strange trip. My first job was at a hot dog stand. My last one was following cheating husbands around, and snooping on people. I quit that job.”

“Why?” Asked Cinder, innocently.

“I got tired of being shot at.”

Suede suddenly looked, thoughtfully around, and said, “Hey, Cinder, can you keep a secret?”

“Yeah. What?”

Suede sat back in her chair and sighed. She knew, as much as she was enjoying this, that she would have to get back to work before Lennie the Team Leader realized she was “fraternizing with a patient”. That was a job no-no, and she couldn’t afford to lose *this* particular job. Not yet.

She suddenly felt a sharp pang of despair in her breast for the girl that sat across the table from her, the only persona she’d met since she ‘d been here who seemed to still have that glimmer, that essential sparkle in the eyes, that made human beings interesting.

Also, she admitted to herself somewhat guiltily, this chick was *cute*. *Really cute*.

“Hm...I don’t see any cameras in here. Well, if so they’re

hidden. But if they come back at me later, they're gonna have a lot of explaining to do when I go to the press. At any rate: c'mon. I want you to see something."

The two women got up, and Suede led her over to the far corner of the room nearest the window. The view, she noted, overlooked the tennis courts that, to her knowledge, remained perpetually unused. A cloud suddenly flew over the sun, shrouding them in an immediate gloom.

There was a door at the far end of the case, locked, but Suede quickly retrieved her set of master keys and unlocked it.

This use to be one big room, but they've remodeled several times, and now all they store in here is old furniture. C'mon. It's okay. We'll only be a moment."

Cinder found that she immediately trusted this woman; it was a strange, giddy, powerful feeling that left her feeling slightly exhilarated and afraid all at the same blow.

Am I falling in love? She thought. *Is this love at first sight?*

She thought she should stop being stupid; she was desperate for a friend, for attention, and she had happened upon Suede (or, rather, Suede had happened upon her), and now she was creating, already, some sort of fantasy in her feeble brain.

I need to stop daydreaming, she told herself. *But that is all I have here.*

The room beyond was a storage space for cast-off furniture, a kind of all-purpose dump for forgotten items that may come in use at a later date. It was dark and cramped, but the light pouring in from the doorway revealed that, at one time, it was the equal in size to the adjoining library. Cinder followed Suede through the maze of debris until they came to a large chest of drawers that must have weighed (or, at least, looked to *weigh*) somewhere in the neighborhood of one solid ton.

"Do you need any?..."

"Wait..."

Suede Leona O'Donnell gripped the massive old thing on its sides, and, with a strength that Cinder could never have

believed she possessed, managed to scoot the thing out far enough to reveal a small, latched door that had been completely hidden by it.. Cinder could only gape.

Suede, huffing and puffing, said, “I also bench two eighty, by the way.”

“C’mon,” Suede said, popping the latch. The thin door swung open, and a sudden, noxious whiff seemed to flow outward. Suede choked, recoiled a bit, and said, “ I don’t know if it’s the pipes or what, but God does it ever stink in here! Whew!”

She produced a small pocket-flashlight, and walked in quickly, one hand held over her nose. Cinder had not known what to expect, but upon entering the room, she was astounded by what she saw.

It was a bare room of bizarre configuration, it’s coming together at bizarre angles. And the walls were black, but it was the strange, frenetic mural that had been painted across them that aroused the greatest interest.

It was as if Hieronymous Bosch had been resurrected to decorate these walls; they told a tale of souls locked in a seemingly cosmic struggle, of hideous shapes unearthed from centuries-long sleep, to roam the world of men once more.

They were executed with the skill of some primitive sideshow banner: freakish demons--with distorted, mutilated faces--operated obscure machinery of torture and terror, and twisted primitive forms groaned on a variety of racks and were impaled on lean stakes set into a hard, icy earth that must have been drawn from the annals of primordial myth.

Cinder tip-toed forward, her blood freezing in her veins, and began to run her fingers over the designs. There were symbols too, an arcane runic alphabet and bizarre inscriptions that might have dated from before Babylon, or even Atlantis.

There was a horrible detail of a bloody, hooded woman with gaping holes for eyes. Her legs were splayed for the benefit of the viewer; she seemed to be giving birth to a dragon.

“My...God. Suede, what the hell is going on in this place?”

But her new friend didn't answer her. Instead she turned, looked at Cinder a moment with a smoky, wanton eye, grabbed her, and kissed her as passionately as she had ever been kissed before.

And Cinder didn't resist her one bit.

"You need to go now. C'mon. We've both been away far too long."

The women exited the room, Suede making sure to push the chest of drawers back into place, giving it a once-over with a cloth to make sure she left no fingerprints, and said, "Did you notice the paintings were all--that they were all newly done? The paint is still fresh."

Pause.

"I'm going to get you out of here Cinder. I can't explain everything to you fully at this moment, but there is a reason I'm here besides mopping floors and cleaning johns. I'm being paid as a sort of--*spy*. I'm working in my capacity as a private investigator. I'm being paid to work here and collect information. Well, I finally think I have more than enough now. And I'm quitting, and I'm going to report to my boss next week. I want you to be there when I do."

Cinder felt her head whirling, but it was a good feeling, not like the heavy, sedated feeling

"You can stay with me until you figure out what to do. I can get you a new identity, whatever it takes. I'm good at this sort of thing, you know. I have connections. But, dearest, believe me when I tell you this: this place is dangerous--there is something really fucking strange going on here. There is too much evidence, too many stories. Too many patients that seem to vanish from week to week."

The women stared at each other for a moment, and then Cinder said, "Okay," and hurriedly embraced Suede in a terrific hug, and their lips met again in a soft, tender, passionate kiss.

"It will take a few days to get things ready," Suede

whispered in her ear, and Cinder felt a hot jab of passionate excitement quiver inside of herself. She began to weep, softly.

“Shhh...it’s okay. Everything is going to be alright.”

A few days...In a few days I will finally be able to leave here.

The thought was as terrifying as it was wonderful.

The Doctor eyed the bank of television monitors of his closed-circuit cameras with a growing sense of interest.

Cinder No Name. Little Miss Jane Doe. There was going to be trouble. There couldn’t be. Not now. Not while they were so close.

Fools. Didn’t they realize that he had electronic eyes, button cameras , and surveillance equipment spread quite evenly and secretly throughout his entire facility? Did they think he was too stupid too realize the importance of keeping a close eye on everything at all times? He belched, quite obscenely, and got up, his knees popping like twin pistons.

He found their little romantic tryst interesting, of course; deviant sexuality had once been one of his areas of special study. But it could bear little importance upon the matter as it now stood. He walked from his desk to his bookshelf, slid it back quite easily (it was a false front) and revealed a doorway behind. He took out a pair of keys, rifled through them a moment, and then unlocked the heavy, hidden door that led to the special facility in the basement. Beyond, he could already here the assorted chorus of moans and gabbles echo upward to greet him. And the smell, while it would have been noxious to another man, smelled to his nostrils sweeter than perfume.

Shit. Piss. Filth. Foulness . It was what was real about the world, if anything was, and since he had been indoctrinated into a deeper understanding of the ancient mysteries, he had seriously began to wonder if, indeed, anything was, truly, real, as it had been defined by man.

He entered, shut the door behind him, flicked on the

overhead lights and began to descend, slowly, a long staircase that stretched down to a set of double-doors, always chained, made of thick wooden boards. It looked faintly, like the doorway to a barn, he thought, and that was appropriate.

He unlocked the heavy padlock and stepped inside. Immediately he was taken with a sense of immense pride at what they had managed to accomplish here, in Bath, Kentucky, in just a few short years--without any interference from the moronic yokels. They had turned a second-rate rate facility into a really fine place. A place that even the Gods could be proud of. He smiled. Irony was so amusing.

The room he entered was something a Dante Aligheri would have dreamed of; it was his own personal Hell, a dungeon of delights wherein his "hospital" ceased to be a hospital. He shivered. He could feel the dark energies accumulated here, could feel the misery and life-force being drained from the shuffling, moaning filthy masses that had been cast down here, in the relative darkness, like the lepers of the cosmos.

He wandered into the midst of them, and while he walked, he could feel the layers of human flesh slip away, could feel his skin grow callous, lizard-like; he was shape-shifting, assuming the true form.

They left him a wide path as he walked, some of them cowering; most of them use to his ungodly presence by now. There were a few attendants sent down here regularly, to this dank cellar prison where shit and piss and foulness swirled into a soup on the floor. There were all his fellow believers, men who had histories of subterranean involvement: organized crime, Satanism, child porn.

And there were ones down here, like himself, who walked with the faces of earthly men, but who, beneath the skin, were crawling with the malignancy of the Forefathers--those who from Heaven to earth fell, and sired them long ago, before the oceans drank Atlantis. He knew that one of the Forefathers was asleep beneath the earth upon which this house rested, and, in time,

when the stars were in alignment and the rituals were performed, and sacrifices made to propitiate the Dark Ones who rested beyond the veil, the Old Father would awake to rule once more.

“You!” he growled at a filthy, scrubby old man who was muttering to himself. The man had been down here in the darkness so long that his skin had taken on an unhealthy, white pallor. His eyes could have testified to anyone that he was mad.

The Doctor, by now a raging monster of grotesque height and hideous shape, strolled over to the cowering, lice-ridden fool as he shivered there in his filthy rags.

“How long have you been here?”

The voice that issued forth was a sepulchral growl; thick and harsh. The Doctor used one claw-like hand to grab the filthy shirt front of the mad old man, and lift him off the floor like a bundle of old sticks.

“How long have you been down here?”

The old man stuttered in terror. He felt his urine drip hot down his leg. His heart pounded against the emaciated cage of his chest.

He could say nothing; in fact, reasoned the Doctor/Thing, may have in fact forgotten the faculty of speech. He dropped the man in the scum on the floor, and strode into the receding of the dungeon.

He came to a series of rooms and alcoves; racks where half-corpses were stretched to the point of madness, chairs hooked to electrodes, horrifying dripping tortures, and whatever else their fevered consciousness could manifest as a fitting device.

He could feel the energy vibrate here, feel the rush of endorphins flood his brain with the energy of suffering. Here was purity. Here was suffering. Here were masses of drooling, pissing, shitting, wandering zombies.

Here was food.

He walked into a small, dark, bare room, in the middle of which was a chair, having attachments on the sides, and strapped into it a bound figure that seemed to be on the verge of

succumbing from sheer terror and exhaustion. The Doctor/Thing strode inside.

The man's forehead was strapped back against the chair, and his lips and eyelids were pulled back with curving metal fixtures. His teeth--yellowed specimens though they were--were mostly intact. They would not long so remain.

The Overseer reached down and grabbed a drill that was hanging from the chair by a thick electrical cable. Later, he would employ a corrosive acid to the teeth, while the suffering victim shifted between excruciating torment and merciful blackness. Later still, in a triumphal fit of exhilaration, the Overseer ripped all the skin from the face, leaving only the glistening musculature exposed in a relief map of pain and torment.

Suede sat in her car in the parking lot, looking up at the oddly-angled institution in which she had worked now for several months.

How was she going to get away with this? Most importantly, what was she going to do with the girl once she got her out?

She knew she liked Cinder a lot. And when Suede O'Donnell liked someone, she gave it her all. It was the way of her. And she had liked giving Cinder that kiss. The woman's mouth had tasted young and fresh. Her manner was willowy, and yielding. Suede shivered. She lit a cigarette.

She had her plastic security entrance she had been issued upon being hired, but she had no idea if the badge would open the gates after hours, and even if it did, she was damn sure that if she just drove up, after hours, and waltzed right in, she would be arrested immediately. Taking Cinder out during the day, while she was supposed to be working, was no good either: she was here to collect info for her employer, period. Kidnapping one of the patients wouldn't look good when it came time for a complaint to be drawn up about this place.

No, she would get Cinder out, hide her, and do it her way. In the middle of all the heat that was going to be coming down on top of this place in a few short weeks, no one would be much the wiser about an “escapee”. Only the state would finally get around to worrying about it--eventually--and by that time Suede knew she could get the girl a new identity. Is it good. Suede was experienced in these matters.

She started up her car; it purred like a pussycat. She smiled at the fact that it had been a rather hefty advance on the part of her employer. It must have cost him a small fortune.

Not like he doesn't have the money for it, she thought. She pulled out drove the long way around the parking lot to the back gate, and realized she was going to have to do a little recon and break out the wire-cutters. Maybe.

Cinder lived out the next few days in a flutter of anticipation and worry. Even the relentless battery of medications didn't seem to be able to quell her growing sense of tension. Every minute in the asylum was thudding hammer upon her brain, and she began to strain herself trying to seem as normal as possible.

The only salvation was the almost complete indifference of the staff here to her needs; patients here, she finally decided, were almost completely left to their own devices. Save for the bustling of assorted nurses and orderlies, a token visit by Nurse Rachel--mostly to pry--and her glimpses of Suede (Suede warned her not to acknowledge her if she should see her “working” around the building, and Cinder had mostly been able to obey this with only a quick, furtive glance to betray her interest), Cinder continued to work through the molasses drip of minutes in the same state of seeming emotional detachment. The only exception was the token “group”.

It was in a disused room on the top floor, with an exceptionally dusty linoleum floor and circle of plastic kindergarten chairs that several patients, including Cinder, were

gathered, along with a younger, thin man in a button-down shirt and tie, and Nurse Rachel.

Nurse Rachel usually carried her clipboard with her, and seemed to be the one in control. The young man was politely observant, but Cinder didn't recall him ever having even told anyone his name.

Group was pathetic; with the exception of Cinder, it was comprised of a gaggle of almost complete mental retardates, most of whom had nothing to relate that was anywhere near comprehensible.

"The government has been putting stuff into my food...they put the microchip into my head. It gets to were it itches something awful."

As if for added effect Microchip Melba scratched compulsively at one worn, balding corner of her thin gray head. Nurse Rachel remarked, "Group...group, I'd like to know what the group thinks about what Melba has just told us. That she thinks that there are people trying to control her with electronic implants and things. Anyone?"

Cinder looked around. Next to her, a thirty-five year old vegetable named Martin Dimesly buried his head in his massive chest, puffed out his cheeks and stated, "I-uh-I-uh-I-uh-I-uh think-uh-think-think-think-I-uh-I-uh..."

"Okay? Anyone else. Cinder? You're awfully quiet today."

Bitch, I never let a peep in here on my best days, thought Cinder, but she said, "Oh, I don't know. I don't know...I guess something like that is possible. Yeah. I could believe it,. But in Melba's case, I uh, think Melba maybe just ...having us on."

Nurse Rachel said, "Is that it, Melba? Are you just playing pretend with us? Or is the paranoia something you don't know if you can control."

As if in answer to her own question, Nurse Rachel suddenly sat up looked quizzical a moment, and asked, "Group, what do you think the role of fear is in our lives.? Is it important to be afraid?"

The haggard old man next to cinder let out a rumbling fart. There was a streamer of saliva hanging from the corner of his mouth.

It was several days later when Cinder learned they were instituting a special “movie night”.

Everyone ambulatory, and a few in wheelchairs, were moved down to the Day Room past the Nurses Station. Cinder had been woken from a gentle drifting sleep in which she was safe in the arms of Suede O'Donnell. A large brusque orderly named Pete--whom she had grown to dislike more and more as the days progressed, knocked on the doorframe with a clipboard, and said, loudly, “Wakey wakey. Movie time. Doctors orders.”

“Huh? Wha--”

“Movie time. Downstairs. Pronto. Everybody.”

Pete went on to the next room, stirring the rest of the ward up.

Cinder sat up, clutched her ribs. She had lost weight in the past few days, worrying. Plus, the food here was really bad. Worse, she hadn't caught a glimpse of Suede in a few days, and she didn't know if the plan was still in motion.

Maybe they would have popcorn, she thought half-heartedly. That would be good for a change. She put on her slippers, got up from the bed, threw her robe on, and shuffled downstairs.

Chapter 4

The old man looked as out of place in the seedy, bustling bar on Route Twelve as a United States Senator would look in a mosh pit. He sat, wreathed in smoke, his very old chin resting on the heel of his hand. He looked as if misery sat curled like a snake somewhere within the pit of his being.

His suit must of cost, at the very least, nine hundred dollars. He sat next to man that looked as if he didn't have eight

dollars. But it was the old man's eye that kept them all at bay; he radiated a sense of power, of fearsomeness, that the bikers and scumbags assembled around him in a sea of bloated bellies and greasy, stringy hair, seemed to respect. Even with his sharp, expensive clothes, his obvious age and sophistication, and his even more obvious wealth, he struck no one as the sort of gent you really wanted to tangle with.

He hefted a beer bottle to his lips, drank, sighed and put it down. He reached into his jacket, pulled forth a rumpled pack of Herbert Carleton cigarettes, picked one from the pack, and lit up. He did not smile, or change expression at any time. He rarely did.

In a few minutes, he knew, the female private detective would enter. She would casually stroll across the bar, sit at the stool adjacent, unload her purse on it, order a beer, and then slide her glance around to his withered old face and bald pate. He knew she didn't like looking directly at him. He knew why.

He puffed his smoke, whet his lips, and mentally blocked out the relentless throb of the jukebox. He wondered what had ever happened to common decency in civilization. Then he smiled, a hellish look on a face such as his. He knew the answer to that too.

Suede parked near the back, closer to the industrial park that surrounded this rotten cul-de-sac. It had taken her awhile to find this place, but it just went to show what a strange old duck "John Gallas" was.

She crunched through the gravel outside, pulled open the single wooden door, and went in. Some god-awful heavy metal was going to make conversation tough, and you could cut the cigarette smoke in the place with a knife. She could feel eyes grope their way over her.

She spotted Galls at the bar. He wasn't hard to pick out in this crowd. She managed to navigate some pot-bellied pool players and made her way to bar.

She sat down, put her purse on the counter, heaved a sigh, said nothing, ordered a beer, turned her head slowly, psyching

herself, and said, "Mr. Galls. Fancy meeting you here."

His eyes seemed to smile for a moment. He raised his beer, said, " ah, Ms. O'Donnell. What, pray tell, finds you out in such--interesting--company this evening?"

"Oh. I don't know. Just thought you might like to have a look-see at these."

She pulled a yellow envelope from her purse, put it down on the counter, asked him for a cigarette even though she promised herself she was done smoking yesterday, tried hard not to brush his fingers as he handed it over.

She didn't like him. She couldn't explain it. It was something instinctual, not because of anything he had done in the handful of times they had met. It was something deeper, something she would never, quite, be able to identify. It was as if his face, somehow, changed, very slightly, every time you looked at it and then looked away. It was the sort of face that she found, for some reason, hard to get a grasp on; she knew she could never begin to actually describe him to, say, a police sketch artist.

But, regardless of his appearance, he was obviously rolling in dough. The contract he had offered her had been more than generous. It was much more than she was usually paid for mere private detective work. She thought that he must represent some secret government agency, but he had made quite clear from the moment that she had first signed on that she would receive only as much information as she needed to do her job. Which, in his case, was virtually no information.

He took the envelope without saying anything, but he seemed almost as if he was just remembering why they were both there in the first place. She looked at him nervously. Mafia? No, he obviously was more dignified than that, nor did it seem likely that the Mafia would be interested in obtaining photographs from inside a mental institution.

He opened the envelope and began to flip through the photos, belying no emotion whatsoever.

Pause.

“That’s all I’ve got so far. But I think its very good stuff. They’re all there, including the negatives.”

Pause.

“Weird. P-pretty weird, huh? I made sure to get pictures of some of the books--they’re contents I mean. I think it has some kind of occult meaning...some sort of cult thing, or something.”

Mr. Galls put the photos back, looked as if he was trying to decide something, then said, “ You have done an exemplary job, Ms. O’Donnell. I thank you, and so does Mr. Creech, my employer. Here, is a token of our appreciation, which I hope you’ll find adequate.”

He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a slim envelope, and handed it to her. She opened it, hesitantly, and stared in disbelief at the sizeable check she was holding between her fingers.

“The rest of it will be deposited in your bank account by tomorrow afternoon. Oh, there was one other thing...”

He trailed off, but suddenly his voice became a cold bite, his rusty, rolling murmur seemed to shift tonally in a way that made it sound vaguely threatening.

She beat him to the punch, reached into her coat, and with a trembling hand she was trying, desperately to control, pulled out an audio cassette tape. This was her verbal “report” of her impressions about Holloway House in the months that she had worked there.

“I didn’t--I didn’t really see anything, besides that strange library, that would constitute...I dunno, *abuse* or something, if that’s what you guys are looking for. I did notice that a lot of patients seem to end up just...vanishing. New faces all the time.”

Pause.

“But that could be explained away--”

His eyes flashed from the cassette in his bony old hand, and bore into hers for a moment. *God!* She thought, *they really are piercing. Almost like two white bolts of lightning.* She looked away from him instinctively.

“What are your impressions, Ms. O’Donnell? That’s what Mr. Creech and myself are interested in? Can you tell me how you feel about Holloway House? What does your gut tell you?”

She leaned back, sighed, quickly and carefully thrusting check and envelope into the hidden, inside pocket of her leather jacket and zipping it for safekeeping.

She picked up her beer, swigged, puffed her cigarette, leaned over the counter closely, and said, “ My honest opinion, Mr. Galls? Do you want my honest opinion? Well, I think the fucking place is...bad. Wrong. Stay away in droves bad.”

She puffed on her cigarette, and considered. She was, obviously, not dealing with sane people on either side of this particular fence. Why the hell did they care what she thought? Wasn’t it only her job to get pictures...to obtain solid info? Well, she had done that. What was going on here?

Suddenly the music started up again, too loud for casual conversation, and she started to ask him if he maybe wanted to go outside and sit in his car. But before she could he rose, produced a flawless Stetson hat he had seemingly had secreted somewhere during their brief interlude, and said, loudly, “Good evening, Ms. O’Donnell. I believe your work is finished. Mine is just beginning.”

And, he turned, striding magnificently through the sweaty, brutish crowd. She watched his back as he made for the exit.

As he made for the exit, a huge, burly gentleman was, apparently, blocking his path--albeit unintentionally. He was drunk, wearing a leather vest with a ghoulish patch on the back (a sign of his motorcycle gang, she thought to herself) and had a greasy mop of hair that looked as if it hadn’t been washed in a little over seven months. His beard was dyed, she could see, a bright pink.

Mr. Galls tapped on his burly back--

“Excuse me.”

The biker spun around, a fierce look in his face, and Suede thought *he’s good and wasted. He’s ready to start something. There might be*

some trouble.

He turned, looked down at the nattily-dressed old man, started to make an idle threatening gesture (Suede could see the muscles of that massive, heavily-tattooed arm begin to clench, even in the dim fog of smoke that surrounded them), and then suddenly thought better of it. Mr. Galls stood as defiantly still and unperturbed as if he had been made of stone.

Suede, who had started to half-rise from her bar-stool, sat back down. She realized she wasn't the only human walking the earth that most defiantly did not like looking Mr. Galls in the eyes.

The thuggish biker simply stepped to one side, and the old man walked out the battered wooden door. Suddenly, something clicking in her mind, Suede got up and followed.

She was a pace or two behind him.

He had just slammed the door on his way out.

She opened it a click later. She could still feel the warmth of his touch on the door (or at least she later told herself that).

She looked around. The parking lot was vacant. The only car worth driving out of this pit was her own new car, bought from the money that she had made working for Mr. Galls. And Mr. Creech, whom she had never even met. She walked to the road. There was no car driving away. There was only darkness down one long, lonely stretch of country road that seemed to disappear into an oblivion that felt as deep and black as the fear and longing in her own belly.

She hurried back to her car. She had no doubt that the money would be in her account tomorrow, exactly as Mr. Galls had promised. So far they had given her thousands more than she would have ever even dared to ask for from a client. It was almost as if Galls and Creech enjoyed pissing their money into the wind.

Planet they're from, they got no need of money, she laughed to herself. *What the hell have I just been a party to?*

She started the car, pulled out, realized with a dawning sense of amazement and fear (as if she had just seen a ghost and not realized it for an half-hour later) that Galls had *literally*

disappeared into thin air, slammed on the brake, started to hyperventilate, tried to reason with herself that there must be some logical explanation...after all, distinguished creepy old men that seemed to have stepped full-grown from the pages of a bad novel did not just disappear into thin air. There was logic in the world still, she was still Suede, and...

As she speeded away from the Route twelve bar, she realized that she had better leave well-enough alone. After all, she had amassed a small fortune on a job that, so far, had cost her nothing. It had been easy as pie, as a matter of fact, and she was entitled to take her earnings, live a little higher than usual, and forget this strange business. She almost felt elated, for a split second.

Chain-link fences and pre-fab buildings whizzed by the window, finally being replaced by dilapidated houses, old barns that had finally crumbled till they were little more than crazily-leaning shells, and miles of open fields and rolling hills. Yes, she should take a vacation. Maybe Hawaii. Maybe Bahamas. What the hell. She was loaded now.

Then, she remembered a promise she had made to a certain young lady. A young lady who, she was beginning to feel, might be in more trouble than she had at first thought. Suede felt a knot of fear grip her stomach. She sped up.

The stars stretched across the country sky. Suede was torn suddenly, between what she *wanted* to do, what she knew she *should* do, and what she had *promised* to do...

But she knew, at last, as she sat in her living room that morning, watching the sun climb across the horizon, in a haze of cigarette smoke, what she was *going to do*.

Chapter 5

Cinder walked into the screening room, and realized that the movie had already been started. A haphazard collection of folding chairs had been set up, and those bound to wheelchairs had been rolled in and sat in front of the screen.

“Oh hi Cinder. Glad you decided to join us.”

Nurse Rachel sounded anything but glad, and Cinder thought, like I had a choice in the matter, bitch. Then she realized they were, indeed, cooking popcorn in a little-used kitchenette to the side, and one of the nurses she didn't know thrust a little paper cup into her hand.

“here's some punch. Now, you have to drink it, and all of it. The rule tonight is no one wastes any snacks.”

Cinder took the cup. It looked like Hi-C, and she sniffed it. She then drank it in one gulp, and handed the cup back, asking, “May I have another?”

To her surprise, she was given another cheerfully, her cup refilled from a giant plastic bottle on the counter. Cinder sat, liking the smell of the popcorn, and tried to get interested in the movie. It was, by god, a Disney cartoon.

My god, how old do they think we are here?

But then she realized, with a secret pleasure, that out of all the patients assembled, she was the only one present who was mentally stable enough to be cynical about sitting and watching children's programs for evening entertainment. She smiled, liking the dim, blue glow of the giant TV screen, and the subdued lightning. An orderly thrust a paper plate of popcorn at her, and yet another Dixie cup of juice.

Old, gnarled mouths gummed popcorn, and one severely-retarded woman insisted on laughing at every single scene, spitting popcorn from her withered old lips. Others, having known the sting of neediness in their lives prior to coming to Holloway, ate far more than their share of popcorn. Cinder was sure some of them would sneak handfuls back in their pajama pockets.

No matter. The Staff was more than generous tonight, for some strange reason. The popper was kept busy, and the juice seemingly flowed.

Cinder tried to interest herself in the cartoon.

Stupid mouse. Stupid female mouse. Dumb cat.

A cartoon world of cartoon people, and cartoon sounds,

and cartoon problems.

Then, slowly, she began to become more interested.

She had never seen that particular mouse do that, uh, particular act with that particular cat.

Slowly, she began to realize something had gone wrong. These weren't innocent cartoons anymore. Her mouth began to fall open, a little, in shock.

She could have sworn she had just seen a cartoon duck bend over, spread his tail feathers, and let a cartoon hunter with a cartoon gun and a fat, pulsating animated cock fuck him in the ass. With plenty of cheery, old-fashioned cartoon orchestra music accompanying every groaning thrust and heated moan.

A cartoon sailor blew a cartoon captain on a cartoon sea where cartoon fish were jumping from the water and saluting with cartoon fins.

A veritable orgy of furry animals began to copulate in a forest while several dwarves with massive, stout penises gang-banged a skinny, crack-whore facsimile of Snow White who took it in all three holes.

Cinder suddenly realized something was crawling on her plate. She looked down. Now she knew someone had a very sick sense of humor.

She dropped her plate, and bent over, retching in disgust. Her popcorn began to squirm across the floor. She could feel puke hit the back of her throat. On the television, a cartoon character said, "Well blow me, Skipper! Suck me fucking cock and then bend over and let me shove my bulging forearm up your ass!"

"Oh Olive, you slut, you got tits like a twelve-year-old girl!"

"Get away from me bitch, Blutto! Or I'll twist your balls off like a pair of gum drops and feed them to you!"

Cinder shot up from her chair, her head spinning, and realized that there were patients laying on the floor, screaming and crying and laying in puddles of their own barf. The room was spinning; her legs seemed to be a hundred miles away from her

head.

A powerful hand suddenly seized her by the shoulder and forced her back around. She sat back down on the folding chair hard, and whoever had been at her shoulder seemed to fade away into the swirling shadows and patterns of color that had erupted like fireworks clouds around her being.

Now, the cartoon sailor was chain-sawing the head off of his hulking rival, in a torrent of blood and gore. The skull opened, revealing a soup of bloody brains and bone fragments spraying into the distance.

Now it was no longer a cartoon. She was staring, in the middle of the screen, into some maddened dungeon where men were men and women were being pulled, limb from limb, with twisted metal hooks embedded deep into the muscles of their bodies. Skin-shredded faces stared out at her from beyond the prison of the two-dimensional surface, and begged for release from the hell that they had been condemned to. One man had his lips ripped away, until he seemed to wear a ghastly, bloody smile. His eyes were twin moons of exquisite, religious suffering.

His head filled the screen--exploded--burst from the inside by a wildly groping claw covered in scales. Behind him, on a coarse wooden table, a hooded man of immense size was peeling the skin off of a nude figure, perhaps a woman, until only the glistening moist musculature was visible beneath. The camera panned, lovingly, over piles of twisted, mangled dead; gaunt, chalk-white faces and empty eyes staring into the shifting patterns of colored light and dark.

Gigantic lips batted on slivers of human flesh.

Dead babies floated in bottles of dark, piss-colored chemical.

The floor was blanketed with teeth, bone fragments, blood, grue, pieces of skin, tufts of hair; fragments of hideous births.

“No!”

She bolted up, began screaming and retching. Hands clasped her. Strong arms lifted her. Talons impaled her. It was like

being caught in the grasp of a million slithering snakes.

She could see nothing now except the same charnel world that had been vomited up, frame after sickening frame. And, before she lost consciousness, she thought she had gone to hell.

She remembered a panorama of violent scenes. A tapestry of pain and suffering, victim and victimization, hunter and prey.

A macabre family of inbred, like something from a bad movie; the father was a stooped, knock-kneed freak with a pock-marked face, limp, filthy, straggling white hair, and clothes that hung from his body in strings of filthy cloth.

On a hook on a wall, trussed up like an animal, a haggard blond woman twitched, her legs streaked with filth, urine, and blood. She knew she must be crouched on the floor, her leg twisted beneath her; sprained, it would be hard to run if she managed to get away.

It was dark, but even in this darkness she could see a rough, filthy wooden table, piled high with rubbish, filth, and what seemed to be pieces of human skeleton. The father had come in for a moment, poked the haggard blond body with a twist of coil, mumbled gruffly for a moment, and then she could hear his heavy scraping footsteps in the dust of the floor, could hear his thick, emphysema-like wheeze...She started to scamper forward, groping blindly, cutting her hands on the jagged filth which carpeted the wooden floor. Suddenly, she stopped; she could hear a macabre, grating gabbling noise, and she now knew belonged to the hulking, feather-covered beast with the steel hooks for hands.

She cowered, trying to pull herself into the deepest, blackest pool of shadow in the corner. Her blood began to freeze; her heart-rate had sped until she feared she might succumb to cardiac exhaustion.

It entered, and she had seen it before, although the events of the night were still loss in a flurry of gruesome images and agonizing terror...he had a horrible, twisted face, a congenital deformity that made lips and nose jut outward like some sort of

mutant beak. His massive, shit-covered exterior was carpeted by feathers, which seemed to have been merely stuck on his clothing in fresh stains of blood and grue, and left to dry there. He wore a skin headdress in the same fashion.

But the worst aspect of his being were the lethal hooks that were strapped to his stubby arms in place of hands. The razor sharp tips must have tasted blood often.

The voice was simply a retarded gabble of hoarse, coarse, gibberish. This was a speech impediment of the sort that would defy all attempts at classification. He might have been gibbering in Martian.

"Blooo! Gabba gloobel yeeep deep zabba! Akka akka whoop!"

It came in, it's massive, filth-encrusted boots clomping on the floor like the thunder of some approaching god, and laid a filthy burlap bag on the table, simply brushing aside the pile of filth and setting down his burden in its place. The top of the bag fell loosely around the object, and the hideous oaf stepped back, let out a torrent of nonsense, in an almost reverential manner, and then turned and went back out through the mouth of the room.

Cinder crept forward again, her eyes trying to pick apart the yellow blur of the object on the table. She finally realizes what it was, in a burst of nausea and torment that sent her weeping, silently, back into the darkened corner, where she hoped she could crawl far enough back into the corner, into the shadows, to disappear from this nightmare world into which she had been pulled.

"No..."

Cinder clumped over into the chair, tears streaming from her eyes.

Dr. Elmer strode around the room, his hands clasped behind his back. He had to admit, she made as wonderful a specimen for hypnosis as any he had yet come across.

"Tell me more: can't you tell me more? I want to know who these people were...or things, or whatever they were. Why do you

think they wanted to do that to you?”

Cinder could see the same images play and re-play in front of her eyes, as if her mind was nothing more than the view screen of some video-projector, that projected the same horrific images over and over again as a continuous loop. She shuddered. She didn't know if she was alive and dreaming or dead and remembering.

Doctor Elmer stared at the painting of a ship on his wall for a moment. At the worst of times, he was able to force the image to move, to come alive; he could make the ship sail away on the blue sea, could make the frame wet with sea spray, could fill the room with the lapping of waves against the rocks. Once, on a whim, he had thrust his hand through the painting, into the wet, just to moisten his fingers. He could shape the world to his liking.

He was shaping Cinder's world, now.

He walked up to her, his crystal glowing on the end of his gold chain, and bent far over her, putting his hand on her tummy, mock-gingerly. Her breast achingly curved just above his knuckles, but he realized he didn't want to reveal himself entirely just yet.

Fresh meat.

It excited him. He would wait. They would continue to build this scenario, frame after horrifying frame. He would be the screenwriter and director. She the compliant scream queen.

“Tell me more. Tell me: whose head was it that was laid upon the table.”

“I...I dunno...I...”

“I think you know. I think you know, and you just don't feel strong enough to deal with it. We must break through. You must remember why you are here. It's for your own good...Cinder.”

“I...I...D-D-D-Dad...”

“Yes?”

“Daddy!” She said finally, angrily, the tears still coursing down her flushed cheeks, her chest heaving. Dr. Elmer liked the

way her breast rubbed against the top of his hand. He could feel his member become rigid.

“ Yes. They killed your daddy, didn’t they?”

“No!”

“Cinder...they killed your Daddy...and they killed your stepmother, uh, ah, Julia. And they killed your little brother Bobby. These...people...have killed a lot of others, too. They would have killed you as well, but you were too strong for them. You found a way to escape. They’re being hunted by police in a number of states...they hid up in the hills, in the old caves and out of the way places for years...but they’ve got away, for now. Authorities seem to think they may have all been killed in a mineshaft cave-in.”

“No...I...I don’t know...”

“Yes you do, Cinder...this is what we’ve been doing this whole time, going over it. We knew most of this information before, but we just didn’t know if you were strong enough, psychologically, to accept it all. So you had to do it yourself. Had to bring it out yourself.”

He rubbed her arm soothingly. He wanted to throw her on the floor, rip her robe off and have his way with her in a fashion she would find painful and humiliating, but he knew they would need her energy; they would need to build the terror, the torment slowly, for maximum utilization of her faculties.

Cinder could see, behind the darkness of her eyelids, the panorama of her existence as it had been: the high school where she had been an ugly, odd duck; the happy home in the suburbs, the cars, the family meals, the faded photographs of yesterday. Bobby playing on the lawn some lost summer ago. Julia making dinner. Daddy...

Oh, oh God, it can’t be true! I don’t want it to be true...no, no, not Daddy and Bobby...I just remembered, I just remembered, I know them now...

“It was a horrifying, atrocity that happened to you Cin, but it’s over now. You need to learn to pick up and move on.”

He leaned farther over her, his nose almost touching her forehead, and she could feel for a repulsive moment, the tremor of excitement in his flabby hand. Her bleary eyes tried to register his face. She found that she loathed and needed him, right now, in the same perplexing measure.

Then she caught sight of something that brought her sense of horror to a whole new level. It flickered for a moment--on his face--in her field of vision, and at first she thought it was merely a trick of the mind. Then she reached down and felt the dry scales of his hands.

She was carried--screaming--from the office by two large, thuggish orderlies.

Suede was always a careful planner.

She had rope, a black burglar's outfit, a bag full of lock-picks and other goodies. She had a map of the surrounding area, and she felt fairly certain she could get over the fence, get inside, get the girl, and get out before anyone knew anything was amiss. It would be easy as pie.

And who would ever suspect her? She didn't even, particularly, care about any legal fallout. She could always claim she was helping a victimized girl escape from the clutches of an abusive facility. If worse came to worse, Cinder and she could simply disappear. Hell, she had enough money to hold them for awhile in Mexico, or maybe even farther.

She didn't sleep well that night. She kept rolling around in bed, images of Galls and the weird library, the strange hidden room, and Cinder all dancing around in her head in various degrees.

At sometime just before dawn she awoke in a cold sweat, dreading, for some unfathomable reason, what was coming. She knew, dimly, that there was going to be more trouble than she at first bargained for; it might turn very ugly, very quickly. She had to be cautious.

She sat in her comfortable old easy chair, smoking one

cigarette after another, and reminding herself that she, desperately, needed to quit. Even more so since, soon, she would need all the wind in her lungs just to get her through the night.

Cinder lay in a stark white room whose white-washed brilliance was matched only by the noxiously-bright fluorescent in the wire cage overhead. One of her arms was strapped in a precarious position over her head; the other was strapped down at her side.

She had been given a wallop of thorazine, she knew, and she had no idea now how long she had been out. She had erupted at the horror she had beheld, written on a face that had, moments before, been as still, as placid as a quiet country lake. Had she really witnessed what she thought she had just witnessed. She wasn't sure now. She thought, perhaps, it could be an after-effect of the hypnosis session.

That's what they'll tell me, anyway, she thought, trying to shut out the vast brightness of the room around her. But she also, deep inside herself, knew better. She had known something was terribly amiss here, almost the instant she had stepped foot in the door those long, dull days ago.

Outside, she could here not a peep. The room seemed to be soundproof as well. She found herself groggy, easily slipping in and out of slumber. She didn't want to sleep though; after what she had just seen, she decided it would be a long time before she ever welcomed sleep again.

She was running in a green field, while all around her, legs that seemed to stretch upward like veritable tree trunks seemed to recede into the swirling mists of her memory. The scene was faded like a bad, old snapshot in a forgotten, dusty album. She looked for faces. The man and woman seemed faceless, incomplete.

She saw a boy; a poor crippled boy in a baseball cap that seemed to trail behind her in life, like some haunting phantasm from a killing she had committed in another life. He was faceless too. She thought, in a moment of agonized dream-logic, that there was something so terrible lurking in the air

of the world, that she may well be losing her mind.

She saw a flutter of leaves, heard the report of a rifle in the distance. Was someone hunting out here? She could feel her child's heart race. The bird fluttered upward into a key that seemed as vast and blue and limitless as all of infinity. She could see it struggle to regain a sense of itself: losing feathers and flapping against the dry, hot currents. She thought she could almost see the missile in slow-motion, rocketing upward at an ungodly, blinding speed, just grazing the blur of motion that was its intended target. She felt her heart thump, and the blood began to drive a pounding hammer of pain and intense anguish into the center of her skull.

The scene shifted. A car, careening through a pleasant suburban neighborhood, its driver a wild-eyed drunk, a maniac, a faceless mannequin seated behind the steering wheel. His eyes bore down on something ahead of him. She could see that he was terrified and enraged in equal measure.

The squeal of tires as the mannequin, miraculously, came to life slammed on the breaks. And then a resounding, pitched wail of agony that rose upward into that same blue, sunny sky, looping a reverberating with the terrified wail of a thousand hungry hopes dashed against the rocks of probability, and fate. It seemed that sound was all there was, and she floated in a white space.

Then that scream became something else, something even more miraculous than the initial sound. It seemed to fade into a static of shifting, hallucinatory sounds, electric choruses and droning wails. It was deafening, ear-splitting cacophony, and, at the center of it, and at the center of the whiteness around her, were huddled, hooded masses in a space that was too black to comprehend.

Suddenly, she saw it again: that face, that horrid, hallucinatory face, that brief explosion, or morph from one image another. It was hideous beyond description. The eyes were like deep pits of red hatred, with long cat-like irises; the face could only be described as some filthy, freakish variation on the face of a reptile. She saw the scaled hands, the hideous claws, could feel, all over her body, the rasp of its ridiculous, sickening flesh. And she could feel it radiate seething, malicious evil.

It spoke only one word to her, but it's guttural, sepulchral growl--the tones of a hungry beast--stayed with her long after she jerked awake,

nauseous, in a pool of cold sweat.

"Mine." It had said.

But it was enough.

She had wet herself, and she was starving. The whiteness would not go away. Now it wasn't just the sickening fluorescent, nor the stark, almost beatific whiteness of the walls. Now it was a lingering, incessant glare that felt cold for her; a sort of icy, illuminated frost that circled the fluttered around the room as if it had a mind of its own, blotting out the corners in the range of her vision. She shivered on her confining restraints. She felt as if she might be on the edge of Hell.

Now, all was forgotten as the icy claws of the mysterious, white cloud reached down with wispy tendrils to tickle her scant flesh. She could feel its immense drain upon her energy with each pass, and realizing for the first time--really--that she was in the presence of the inhuman, she became terrified. Really terrified; mortally afraid, in a way she had scarce experienced before. She felt like an animal trapped in the clutches of some obscene parasite she could neither grasp or fully understand.

She shivered as its cold tendrils licked her body. It's strange, white glow seemed to blank out the entire room now, and she resolved herself that she was going to be sucked of all the marrow in her bones and cheer in her heart; that this tenuous, intangible *thing* was going to steal the life-force from her tired form. And where would her consciousness be left, she wondered.

Her lips trembled, her hands quivered in their straps. This could not be. Yet, it was. Was she dreaming some interminable nightmare that refused to end.

Suddenly, mercifully, she caught the faint forms of what must have been orderlies, like the shadows behind a frosted glass, coming close to her bedside. Closer they crept, like they were viewing her, fully, for the first time.

Like they were seeing her from the inside out.

Their clothes were hospital white. So were their faces. That

was where the similarities ended.

She screamed louder than she ever had before. He mind snapped into tiny fragments.

No human beings should have faces like that. No human beings.

The hills wrapped legends into their rocky embrace. Pale revenants of by-gone old timers, still trapped in the illusion of their earthly existence, still persuading modern earth-bounds to stop and give them a lift. A strange hairy man-beast haunted the woods here, there, or somewhere about, startling hunters and yokels and building up legends.

Some people even said they had had roadside encounters with tall, blond, friendly UFO occupants. Suede had heard all of the rural rumors, knew most of them by heart, and believed none of them. At this present time, she was concerned not with hairy spacemen, but with circumnavigating the winding hills and back roads around Holloway House, trying to find the best place to ditch her car, climb the chain-link fence, and skirt around the building until she could enter it relatively unnoticed.

Then, she would quickly head for the kitchen area, use her own key (which she had carefully stolen from her supervisor, had copied, and then replaced within hours without him ever having been the wiser. For this task, she had had to fork over a few dollars and an IOU to a particularly dishonest tradesman in her acquaintance, noting once again how fortunate she was, at times, to have such seedy contacts) and head upstairs quietly, quickly, like every cat burglar she had ever studied. Then she would get her girl, hustle them out, step by step, go back the way they had come, if possible, and be off. She was already thinking about an extended stay in say, Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico might as well have been Mars right now, she reflected, as she maneuvered the car over rough, potholed roads and across gravel and through stands of trees and sloping hills.

She had passed a disused cemetery on the way here. She

hadn't liked that. And she didn't like that hellish, bright moonlight much either. She was committing a criminal act tonight, one she felt reasonable sure she would get away with, considering the circumstances, but a criminal act none the less. She would have liked the cover of darkness for that .

She saw Holloway House rise up in the moon-wash gloom. There would be a Nurse at the front desk, a few orderlies and a medic perhaps; most of the staff would have gone home by now.

She had spent several hours that morning trying to talk herself out of it; after all, when Galls finally revealed, as she assumed he would, his suspicions about this particular institution--to the papers, or local television--them most likely , depending on his influence (and lets face it, the man, and his unseen boss, were most definitely powerful, connected people), he would probably have the place closed down. She tried totell herself that the kid would be okay without her. That she could visit her in a new place, a real hospital. That someday, maybe, they could be friends without any interference from officials, hospital, and all other such rot.

Her headlights ate the darkness in front of her in little eerie twin moons of vision. The world seemed still and dead, the trees looked like they carried sinister secrets in the dark spaces between their branches.

She had studied her area well for a few days beforehand; she knew there was a little cul-de-sac of trees that bordered on the old hill were Holloway house brooded. She would park at around one in the morning, wait for a minute, nervously smoking a cigarette, get out, walk through the small woods, make her way up the hill, climb the chain link fence (she was reasonably still sure she was in good enough shape to do this), and would walk through the largely deserted backyard area, past the tennis courts. And come to the back area of the house. There, she would make use of the service entrance, get into the building, navigate through the maze of downstairs hallways, take the bottom freight elevator up, and slip upstairs. Then she could grab her girl, get her

downstairs and out, hopefully, before anyone was the wiser.

She went over her list of reasons not to do this again: possible jail time being the first and foremost in her mind. She knew damn well that if she was caught, she would wake up in jail, and matters would go from bad to worse. No, she almost told herself, better to wait it out, see what happened...if the place was shut down, if the state stepped in and did their job, well, it would just be a matter of time before Cinder would be adjudged well enough to take care of herself. Suede might even be able to take her in as a legal guardian.

As she carefully navigated the car around another blind bend in the road, and through another dark stand of woods, and as the damnable moonlight turned the surrounding countryside into something that haunted the imagination with visions of loneliness and foreboding, she caught sight of Holloway, perched up the gathering incline of a hill, lost to shadows and all but official memory. She found her parking space, shut off the lights, prayed that a nosy sheriff wouldn't happen by anytime soon, and decided to park even deeper into the stand of trees than she already was.

She sat there a moment, getting her thoughts together. She double-checked everything, made sure she had the copy of the pass-key securely in her jacket pocket, and put on her favorite, lucky hooded sweatshirt. She always wore it when the job she was on was risky, and it had--she liked to tell others--never failed her. She hoped it wouldn't now.

She got out, tossed the cigarette, and could just see the faint glimmer of lights up the hill, through the trees. She began to walk, her steps quickening as she penetrated the darkness. She reflected, not for the first time, that she really did have to do this.

She had like that girl from the first time seeing her, and knew, of all the places in the world, she did not belong at Holloway. And Suede had promised...she always made good on her word; it was a code she lived by, her "bread and butter" code, and it kept her in business.

In a few short years she had amassed enough experience in shady affairs, going after cheating spouses, white-collar crooks, men that stalked women in an insane and baffling “cat and mouse” fashion that defied logic. She had taken every case that came her way, had sat brooding in her office when none did, and she couldn’t even afford to hire a secretary to do the typing. But she had always maintained. But she had learned from Jack, and he was the best that there was, a poor man’s James Bond when it came to special cameras, phony documents, tracking people, espionage. You name it. He had been the only man she had ever loved.

Jack was dead now, and she said a little prayer as she walked, hoping the Good Lord and Jack Martin were looking out for her now.

She smiled, in spite of things. She could just see Jack, sitting on a cloud, a martini in his hand and his rumpled overcoat sprouting feathery wings. Jack would be sloshed, his old felt hat hanging to one side. And, my, wouldn’t the Lord have a time with him?

She made her way up the steadily inclining ground, shivering at the chill that had, unseasonable, taken a seat on the air. The weeds around the fence were thick, you could pull yourself up by handfuls, and the fence outside was one tall mother, but she knew she was good, better than good, and getting over it wasn’t going to be a too mean a trick.

She then saw Holloway House, from the back, a back cloaked in uneasy darkness, and secrets that she knew were being kept hidden. There were staff there that weren’t in the know: cooks, custodians, some nurse aide peons to whom this place was nothing more than another job. But she had seen enough in her short time here, undercover, to convince her that she wanted to do this. HAD to do this. It might not be in her hands anymore if she waited. And, well, she was a woman of her word...

Cinder came to in the darkness of the pit.

Around her, she could see that human body parts had been dropped, in haphazard fashion, and left to decay. The smell was one of earth, mildew, and intense putrefaction. Her vision adjusted quickly though, as the top of the hell looked out into an underground chamber that seemed to be lit by flickering flame.

Her mind reeled; she had no idea, now, what they intended to do to her. She was thankful only that, for the time being, she was away from those hideous...things...she didn't know what the hell they were. It was as if the world had gone off its rocker, and the real people had been replaced by monsters from some bad b-movie feature. She sat, miserable and afraid, in a darkened circle of the pit.

Suddenly, her pulse jumped. She thought that she could hear, faintly, a sort of weird dusty moving about down here. Close to here. And then an imperceptible hiss, like the escaping of steam.

Oh god, they've left a fucking snake down here with me!

She tried to burrow into the packed earth of the pit, tried to lose herself again, in the way she always dreamed of: fade-out, no more, good bye cruel world. Instead, the hard earth remained mockingly impenetrable.

She could see or believed she could see for a moment, the weird, twisting, hypnotizing unwinding of a standing python, could see it undulate and ripple in the dim flicker of light cast into the darkness below. Her heart began to thud against her chest, and she could feel a sickening drop in the pit of her stomach. She closed her eyes.

The hiss grew louder, closer; she began to tremble. She fancied she could feel scales moving over her.

Then:

"You're new around here, aren't you?"

Her eyes flew open. It had been a little-boy's voice that had spoken just now. There was someone else down here, sharing this particular oubliette. She looked in wonder at the strange, crouched little form that was before her.

He was small, rail-thin, bald; half-starved, but with large, beautiful, magnificent eyes that seemed to shine in the dark.. His hair was misty strands of white; his cheeks were sunken in and the mouth was a thin, brutal slit of rotted teeth. The pale flesh was deeply saturated with filth, and he wore a loin cloth that must have, at one point, been white.

“I’m called Ricky. what’s your name.”

For a moment she was too frightened to answer, but then she managed to stammer out: “I’m C-Cinder. How did you get down here? What is this place. Who are these...things...”

He smiled, a horrible looking expression that put her in mind of some sort of feral animal, amused at the wit displayed in flaying alive a smaller, defenseless creature.

“I’ve been down here...oh, a long time...You’ll have to get use to things down here. It’s heaven, you see.”

“Heaven?--*Well, it sure as fuck doesn’t seem like heaven!*” Cinder blurted, between tears and rage. She didn’t want to be close to Ricky, dreaded the thought o actually touching him...but she found that she did, instinctively, seem to inch closer, as did he.

“You have much to learn. This place is, ah, a turning point, if you will... they’re doing things here that are going to be important someday. Really important. I know. I use to be one of them myself...but then the Overlord took serious offense to something I did...he took from me...Ah, but you wouldn’t understand.”

He began to scratch some sore under his arm. Cinder fought back the urge to cry, stifled her useless tears, and pried her fellow captive for information.

“H-how old are you Ricky? You seem awfully young...to...be down here.”

He considered.

“I am this many...”

He suddenly held up both hands, and she realized that he was missing three fingers on one , and two on the other.

He began to laugh, an even more unpleasant sound than

his speaking voice, which was thin and rusty and sounded like the prying-open of a coffin lid. She stared in disbelief. This boy was as mad as all the rest of them.

Then, as if in confirmation of this thought, his laugh became a sort of barking, coughing exhortation of rage and self-pity, and he put his stumpy hands to his eyes in frustration and rage.

"They're so mean to me! So very, very mean to me! Curse them! Curse them! Thrice curse and damn them all to hell!"

He was crying out of dry sockets, and, as Cinder stared in disbelief, he seemed to literally *hop* from his sitting place back into the darkness on the other side of the pit. She thought, for a moment, that she could see those beautiful, large, iridescent eyes shine on in the darkness, but then the twin blue orbs faded, and all she could hear was that same, strange, serpent-like slithering, and the sickening hiss, as she struggled to maintain her wits.

Suede had managed, with much sweat and exertion, to finally climb the fence.

She had cut the hell out of herself on *something*, and she had dropped from the top onto the ground and twisted her damn ankle. Oh well. She was here and it was done. She would limp on as best she could.

The back area of Holloway was as riotous as the architecture of the building itself; the overgrown gardens, low fences, twisted walkways, and old tool sheds created a natural obstacle course. This was the least-used and, thus, the best area of the grounds from which to execute a jailbreak. On the west side was the employee parking lot.

She made her way through garden paths, taking in the fragrant odors, not liking the garden one bit. Flowers made her think, always, of funerals. She crept, hid behind corners, played it safe. Jack Martin had taught her, practiced her, when he took her under his wing.

Finally, she made her way to within a few yards of the back

porch area, which was screened in and would of course be locked. She hurried across the lawn, catty-corner to the tennis courts, and then suddenly, unexpectedly, was caught dead in her tracks.

The tennis courts had been outfitted so patients could come out here at night and play, with staff approval. None ever had, but that was the reason for the huge bank of lights overlooking them. Those lights created a wide area of illumination.

And, as she began to hurry across the open field area just before the little-used back entryway, they all came on in a blast of blinding, terrifying whiteness.

Part 3: Out of the Frying Pan and Into the Fire

Chapter 1

Hell is a place of eternal joy and wonder; there may be a dull moment now and again, but on the whole, even if you're not having fun, they at least force you to look as if you are.

Take for instance the drug addict, whose tolerance of an addictive substance soon proves so infuriating that, eventually, only a larger amount of the substance will suffice to alleviate anxiety and withdrawal. Also, the sexual pervert, who requires greater and greater fixes of pornography and sadism until, verily, he is glutted on sensation.

But, we ask, how is it that what once caused such joy can become, after awhile, such a burden? A wonderful tune, for example, when played, ad infinitum will eventually cause displeasure to the listener. Give it a few hours and he will begin to grit his teeth, and slip a hand over his ears. A few weeks in isolation, with the same musical number being pumped in through an intercom, and he may be seriously considering suicide.

A year, and let's see if he can remember his name anymore.

Another year, and he may forget that the music is playing at

all.

We are creatures bound by the world of sensation: we hunger and eat, we touch and taste, we smell and feel--we remember the way that we want to. Old horrors become blanks in our mind; new wonders lose their edge, and recede into the faded fabric of yesterday. And this is the way of the world.

Down, beep below the earth, in a series of abandoned mineshafts, Hell had begun to recreate itself from the tortured, nightmare fabric of man's consciousness. The Marquis De Sade could not have devised a subterranean world so full of the expert manipulation of pain, pleasure, and sensation.

Level upon darkened level contained the cast-off, wandering results of lobotomy and surgery, deformity and mutation, torture and murder. This was the secret world of those who waited their time, and worked, in small steps, toward the Great Work of the Ages. It had always been thus: the Overseer could not now, envision, how it could ever be any different.

Little by little, beings of even more astounding and horrific form had been able to slip through the widening gate, to invade the human host, to bring about the single greatest mass-sacrifice, and, consequently, the greatest battery of energy that Dark Wave consciousness had ever experienced. They lived here now, their machines burrowing and digging and blasting rock, continually, building the subterranean fortress of the advance army. Human kind, with all of its potential, and all of its *energy*, could be utilized--in fact, had been utilized--since the ancient times of the Forefathers. Now the Overseer, their progeny and their heir, occupied his own human skin suit, kept his own pet soul imprisoned in a hallucinogenic from which he would never let it escape. He had liked the fool immediate; his half-baked attempts at signing away his soul were, for the most part, extremely amusing.

The Overseer and his crew were constantly busy; he (or rather, IT) was determined, against all better judgment, to maintain the same state as he had since the original schism,

wherein he separated--rather abruptly, and with no aplomb whatsoever--from Holy Source. Worse yet, when Holy Source had decided it had had more than enough of the raging conflicts between all of these various intelligent personalities, it tried--desperately tried--to reawaken itself to the possibility of union of the One.

That was bad. That was very bad. That could mean the end of everything. Would mean the end of the Overseer, and well, he wasn't about to let *that* happen.

Ah, Human Being was fertile material. What power, what awesome, naked control, these physically-encumbered creatures could possess, if they but took the time to remember, in a real, significant way, what they *really were*.

I've become sentimental or something, he thought to himself, and raised himself from his chair.

It was a throne of his own personal design, cobbled together from heaps of skeleton and leathery skin. He found it relaxing, and as he reclined, often he could sift through the energies and agonies that these old bones had once felt and suffered with.

Ah, this one under my left buttock suffered from...a hernia. This one had muscular dystrophy...this one was a leper, or I'm a purple-assed baboon...aching joint. Gall bladder. Died from asphyxiation. Died from torture when we piled stones on his chest and pulled out his fingernails with red-hot pincers.

Yet, even in the midst of his rapture, there were troubling things. He could test the psychic waters of the world, spin out into the various frequencies and judge for himself the state of things in the world of the intangible and invisible.

Above them, too many souls crying out within the cosmos; lost, nowhere to go, flitting through an eternity of darkness, still believing themselves embodied, or, alternately trapped in the prism of whatever hallucination sufficed. Living nightmares. But in the center of it all, he could hear one lonely, child-like voice crying out. He thought he recognized that presence, but he

couldn't be sure. He tried to penetrate the screen it had set up.

No dice. He kept getting the same innocuous images: clouds floating by, sunrise and sunset, a cool lake, a puppy dog.

It made him queasy. Who the hell was that little, worrisome piece of fragmented consciousness fighting his way, and beating a path, back to Godhead? What, pray tell, if other angry energies began to join him?

And, the Overseer was sure, there was an even greater One, beyond Him, that was worthy of fear. The Root. The First. The One.

Oh, it was the "Sorrows of Satan", all over again, he reflected bitterly. At such moments he would lean back, resting easy on the decaying flesh of his palace throne, and re-live some minor detail from a month or two ago, letting the image transport him backward in time, letting it take over the three-dimensional space he now occupied until, fundamentally, he was an actor simply re-living an important role on the silver screen.

It had been a meeting with Hosty, a Special Agent of the Government of the... *YOO ESS EH*-yes, that was what they called it. He had wondered, in a near state of panic, what he was going to wear for the benefit of the so-good Special Representative, until finally deciding to appear in the form of the classic "Grey" extraterrestrial; he knew that the spy-game types loved that one.

"Hosty" was, it turned out, a rather unexceptional fellow who had very poor, half-formed shielding, and almost no comprehension of the enormity of the beings he was opting to form an alliance with. He was under the assumption that they were all local aliens from Sirius B, or maybe even inner-earth (they were, after all, based underground), and he had brought with him the usual contingent of hired guns and little, devious minds. The Overseer had been amused for a short time.

Hosty had, among other things, organized military coups in half-a-dozen small island nations, had been the planner behind a string of successful assassinations and kidnappings, had been

liaison between the C.I.A. and the Mafia in the interest of involved in drug-running and arms deals...he had been around the block, so to speak. He was not afraid to get his hands dirty.

The small group of men had been guided down into His world by an adjunct, disguised in the flesh of an Army captain. The Overseer carefully curtailed the visiting experience to meet the Agent's expectations: soldiers and Grey's mucking about, vats of human body parts, futuristic operating tables. It was all a funny little game.

The men, unused to an alien appearance, had all stiffened when first walking into the room...but, the Overseer knew they were hardened men, and he looked, at this present time, just a little but worse than the worst case of congenital deformity that each of them had ever seen. Hosty, briefcase in hand stepped forward and said:

"Greetings on behalf of the President...he wishes me to send you his warmest regards, and to let you know that he regrets that he cannot meet with you personally."

The Overseer considered the tall, oval-faced man in the dark glasses. His mind was high and tight, but not, by any means, a closed subject. He began to scan the man: his thoughts, fears, and memories...

"We see that you are most pleased with the present situation as it has developed... our alliance has brought about a profitable cultural and technological exchange, one that I'm sure will only continue to benefit the both of us."

Hosty eyed him behind his obsidian shades, and the Overseer knew he was somewhere in the middle of mistrust, repulsion, and outright fear.

He's a tough one...good at hiding his feelings. Very experienced.

"Yes...and the new technology we've developed from your own plans will greatly aid in defending our great nation against any outside aggressors...Of course, I'm sure there are still a few surprises in store for us, Overseer." Pause. "The agreement--our long standing agreement, is still solid. My superiors assure me that

as long as we can be mutually beneficial to each other, your crew and yourself have no fear of any *outside intervention* in your affairs here. In turn, we will continue to allow a certain segment of our own population for, for... *your stated purposes*. We understand that nothing comes for free, and we feel that, well, what we are getting in return...is too valuable to let go of very easily..."

Hosty set his briefcase down on the floor, put his hands on his hips, and looked as if he was making himself somewhat more comfortable. His manner was more relaxed; friendlier.

"Now, we know there are a lot, I mean a fucking lot of people up there that would love to get the dibs on you guys, what goes on down here...there have been all kinds of wild rumors floating around for years. Hell, I would love to know all the juicy details for myself, except I don't have time for that right now...The Working Group is on a tight schedule, and I have to adhere to that. What we are looking for, pure and simple, is this: first, we need your assurance that you will significantly reduce your visibility on the outside...if at all possible, keep the abductions and mutilations to a minimum, for the time being. Remember: the success of any operation is determined by the level of secrecy that can be kept. Also, we were wondering if you guys had any insight on this whole Middle Eastern question..."

And on and on the fool went. The Overseer was more interested in the past remembrances and misdeeds of Hosty himself, than any information the man might want to "share", or idiotic suggestions he would make. The Overseer simply went through the motions of this part, the part of *Quazgul*, the Grey; all benevolent wisdom and soft voice and thin, reed-like body. It was a good costume; the true consciousness of this creature was fitted very neatly in the palm of his hand, and all he had to do was make a few gestures to hold the pose.

"...So, you see, we have spread, over the years, enough disinformation to, ah, keep the public guessing...but not everyone is as dumb as all that. What our subliminal messages, food additives, and microwave towers don't take care of, *disinfo* does. It

tales up the slack; makes even serious researchers look like fools...”

The Overseer was bored, but he managed to pontificate in rational, extraterrestrial manner. He found himself wishing these sordid fools would leave.

Finally, after another few minutes, he regretted to inform his guests that his attention was required elsewhere. They were shown by his disguised subordinate back out of the maze of subterranean passages, and left at their car, parked in a rural location.

The Overseer let the carefully-chosen facade slip; he loosened his grip on the subatomic structure, and his underground paradise rearranged itself, back to the manner of his natural liking.

He was reclining again, comfortable in the shape of a vast, tall demonic monk in a cloaked black hood. A character he had picked up somewhere...in maybe another time, or dimension...

Hosty. Hosty had once met a man named Jim Jones...a religious figure. The Overseer brought the memory to life before him in the dark. Jones was a sort of Hitler-like creature, a rabid conman and psychopath who convinced his followers, eight hundred or so people, to drink a fruit drink laced with cyanide. The man wasn't half-bad, thought the Overseer. Very Hitler-like.

Hitler.

Now there had been a fellow that showed *real* promise.

Suede had been knocked unconscious, dragged into the back entryway, over, apparently, the stone steps, and into the inner sanctuary of Holloway House.

She was quick to figure out she had been dragged because of the way her back felt, like someone had used it to try and sand a skiff full of rough-hewn logs. Her clothing was torn in back, and her skin was raw and bleeding. She opened her eyes on darkness, gradually adjusting her vision by the light of the moon streaming through the curtained windows.

She was not sure what room she was in, but it must, conceivably, be a part of the infirmary. She knew she was, at least, laid out on an examining table. Yes, cold dry paper beneath her. Um-hum; sure enough.

She grasped her forehead and moaned in spite of herself. She was going to be pressing one hell of a lawsuit after this was all over. Nobody had actually said she couldn't be here after working hours. For all anyone knew, she could simply have been coming to fetch something she left at work, and decided to take the back way in...it would seem suspicious, though.

She got up. What the hell was she worrying about lawsuits and all that rot for right now, anyway? She wasn't sure what was going on, and she knew that, properly, she should be well-frightened. She got up, gingerly, and tip-toed, as best she could (her ankle was quite swollen, and now her head and back were killing her to boot) and went to the dim, yellowish shape ahead of her, that she knew must be the door.

She took the cold, round knob in her hand, twisted, discovered, immediately, that it was locked, wondered for a moment what she was going to do, went to the window, pulled up the blinds, found it locked and painted shut, realized she was going to have to wait this out, found her hand had strayed to the waistband of her pants, in the back, and didn't have to reach around to realize that whoever had clocked her had, obviously, thought to get her gun, too.

She sat down on the examination table, and waited. And waited.

Cinder had been clawing, desperately, at the loose dirt of the pit, trying to claw her way up the side, and out. She was filthy now, but she was damned if she was just going to sit and wait until they came for her. She had been fighting for life for months now, ever since she had been found wandering that lost highway road by an Officer Friendly that had, initially, insisted she was an abused hooker, hopelessly addicted to crack.

Well, she was neither, she was Cinder, and whatever the meaning behind this nightmare, she was determined to live.

Up, and slide back down...up, and slide back down.

The dirt was loose, but she was starting to make some headway, when, suddenly, from below her, a mad, cackling little voice peeped, "What's all the fuss for? I told you, it's heaven in here!"

"It's not fucking heaven, you asshole! Quit saying that!" She creamed, her voice choked with tears of rage. She had, actually, managed to scale, in a very dirty, grasping way, half way up the side of the pit.

There was laughter beneath her, then, in a weird, child-like warble, Ricky said, "Ah, don't be cross with us. You're so mean! Why are you so mean to me? Why are they all so mean to me? Why? Why? WHY?"

Ricky was screaming and crying again, but Cinder ignored him, pulling at the dirt in a mad scrabble for freedom, trying with every last ounce of energy to liberate herself. Her arms felt red-hot with strain, and she was worried, for a moment, she would faint from the exertion.

For some reason, she said, "I-I wasn't trying to be mean to you, Rick--I just want to fucking get free from here! Jesus!"

Suddenly, she looked up to see a pair of strangely beautiful eyes peering over the rim of the great hole at her.

"Why didn't you say so to begin with?"

It was Ricky. For a moment, Cinder almost lost her grip at the side of the hole, and went tumbling back down in the darkness. He thrust a skinny, dirty, scabbed arm down at her.

"It--it's not long enough!"

He poked his head up, considered, and then retreated into the gloom for a moment. Cinder could feel her position slipping, had her hand tied around something that amounted to a protruding root, and her legs were just begging to slip from an outcropping of rock, when he suddenly appeared again with a long, tattered, filthy end of something that must have once been a

strip of cloth. She grabbed for it with one hand, and he held tight the other end, with a strength she would have never dreamed he could have possessed.

It was slippery, and but she managed to wind it around one hand.

The combination of her terror and his great strength, her scrabbling and his pulling, was, mercifully enough. She managed to scabble over the top of the pit, and, for the first time, stood next to Ricky.

He was small and thin, so pitiful and dirty, she wanted to frantically embrace him for a moment. For that moment, as awful as he was, he was a savior, and she needed saviors now, very badly.

But the weird, animal-like quality of him, his mutated, filthy being, was enough to quell her rush of affection. She realized he was, quite possibly, too mad to realize he had done her a favor.

Has he? Where in the hell am I? How do escape this place?

She might also have asked him how he managed to escape the pit himself, and in such an incredible instant of time. Since there was no time for such questions, she instead asked: "Ricky, will you help me get out of here? If you will, I'll let you come with me. Whatever you may think, Ricky, this is a long way away from heaven. A long fucking way."

When the door was finally opened and light came pouring in, Suede winced, and could see, for a moment, a very prim-looking, very thin female shape standing in the doorway.

Suddenly, the overhead lights were switched on, and Suede found herself face-to-face with Nurse Rachel.

She had seen Nurse Rachel on a number of occasions, had found her body worth looking at, but knew nothing else about her.

Nurse Rachel, however, was not at all in uniform. She was wearing a black blouse and miniskirt with a strange, red arm-band. The symbol on the armband was black on white against the red, like a Nazi armband, but the insignia itself was some inscrutable

runic-thing that she had no idea the meaning behind.

Nurse Rachel had very prominent cheekbones, hair tied behind her in a tight little bun, and a pair of black satin gloves that must have cost a small fortune. She was wearing stiletto heels, fishnets, and, by God, even carrying a riding crop. She was lazily puffing at a cigarette.

“Is it Halloween already? Jesus, I forgot my costume...”

“Shut the fuck up. What were you doing, trying to sneak in after hours?”

Suede thought that the Nurse (if she really was that) was oddly nonchalant about the whole affair, and said, “A better question would be: do you work in a mental hospital, or belong in one? It’s considered highly unprofessional to show up for work dressed in a cheap, b-grade dominatrix outfit. By the way, I intend to sue the hell out of you, this place, and whatever goon you hired to knock me out. I am an employee here still, and all I was doing was--”

“--All you were doing was breaking in unannounced to steal from us. Hell, it’s pretty obvious what you were doing, but I guess you may be mentally slower than what we had assumed. We don’t worry about legal entanglements around here, Suede. Why the surprise, that’s your name, isn’t it? And you have the *hots* for one of our patients here. We told you that was a no-no from the day you signed the contract. But this obviously goes deeper. We’ll just have to let Father handle it His way.”

Suddenly, Nurse Rachel stepped forward, grasped the back of Suede’s hair, and violently kissed her on the mouth. Suede, for a moment too stunned to do anything but reciprocate, felt Nurse Rachel’s hand reach up and grasp the seat of her jeans. Her nails were long, black, and spike-like. Suede began to knead the flesh beneath Rachel’s miniskirt, pulling the fabric upward, sliding her fingers beneath the silky panties and clutching her firm backside in a quivering grasp.

Suede suddenly dug her fingers as hard as she could into Rachel’s flesh, causing the woman to scream, draw back, and spit

in her face.

Suede sent her reeling across the room, turned, flew out the open door, and nearly missed colliding with a walking mountain covered, it would seem, in dirty feathers and dried blood.

“You’ll pay for that--*fucking bitch!* Get that fucking bitch! Get that fucking bitch! Hurry!”

The Mountain was carrying some sort of sharp, spiked weapon. Suede dodged one downward swing, nearly lost her balance against the opposite wall, and took off, into the darkened corridor.

She had gotten one quick, fleeting look at the walking mountain.

Jesus, she thought to herself. *It really is Halloween.*

Cinder ran as fast as her legs could carry her into the darkness of the labyrinth. It seemed that at every turn, there was something more to shock and offend her sense of what was real.

The maze of underground passages seemed to be equal parts basement, cavern, prison, crypt, and zoo--ahead of her, scrambling and leading into the darkness, the frail form of Ricky was something more feral, more primitive, than even an insane boy. He seemed to be not, altogether, human.

“Come--this way. Before it is too late. Can’t you hear them?”

Indeed, it seemed as if she could hear a growing reverberation; a cacophony of voice and moans that seemed to lie, like some subtle soundtrack, just beneath the surface of her frenzied breathing. She skidded to a stop, crouching low behind a massive outcrop of stone that seemed to have been worked by some ancient, demented sculptor.

Her fingers played, unconsciously, over the edges of the abutment; she could feel strange cryptograms, weird and hideous tracings, leering and grotesque faces--the carvings seemed to suggest mountains of tumescent flesh, twisted knotted vines, and piles of moldering dead all in the same primitive construct.

Suddenly, the thin, weird voice of Ricky screeched in her ear, causing her to jump.

“They are the Ones--they have slipped, will slip, are slipping through the Open Way. They come to infest this bottom level, to feed off the parasite man and make the world safe for Nightmare and her children...They are the *Dark Wave*. It is total war, now...”

Cinder looked at him, thinking him to be quite mad. But no matter: he seemed, at least, to be on her side. Or so she thought. She decided to play along with his madness, and asked, “So--*so what now?* What do we do now? Why did they put us down here? And how the fuck do we get out? Huh, Ricky? How?”

He rocked back on his skinny filthy legs, and said, “Ah! Me! My! Foe! Fie! How? How? How? Why? Why? Why? There may be no answer! Everything you love will die! Drat me! Curse me! They are all so *cursed mean!*”

He began to pull his scant filthy hair between his fingers and cry. Cinder suddenly clutched him close to herself, and began to weep herself.

“Oh Ricky,” she wept. “*You are so fucking crazy...*”

Suede raced down the large central staircase, and the Mountain followed, gibbering in its weird, sickening cackle.

She was a mad dash away from the front entrance when, suddenly, it burst open, and a scrawny, filthy-looking young man ran through, a large knife clasped firmly in one hand, and a length of rope in the other.

“Get that bitch Cousin Darryl! C’mon now! Just like a good old-fashioned coon hunt! We gonna string this one up and skin her alive, boy!” Suede locked eyes with him for one brief moment, realized he was a profoundly psychotic retard, and pivoted running toward the Nurse’s station, leaping over the counter, knocking over a chair, and running through the doorway in the back.

Cousin Darryl and the man that had ran in the front

collided, nearly knocking each other off balance, before the great, feather-covered mountain managed to right his immense bulk, and proceeded to follow, his cousin hooting madly behind him. Suede found herself in a series of rooms, one after the other, which opened in on each other in a confusing fashion. She twisted her way through the maze of rooms, opening one door after the other, running into the room, running fast out, searching for a way to safety. And she could hear them, pound after her, making the noise of elephants, certain that they would capture their mouse.

Cinder found she could not stop for long. Always, the sound of scuffling, slithering presences seemed to haunt the dark. She followed Ricky, whom she knew now was as eager to escape as she, through the winding darkness, clinging to him now and again, as one who understood the rules of this strange, sepulchral world better than she ever hoped to.

They had made their way, breathlessly, until they came upon a series of passages that seemed to be laid with ancient brick. Here, there were doorways on either side that lead to small rooms of ill-defined purpose.

Above the doors were engraved symbols that Cinder could not guess the meaning of. Cinder slowed down, casting furtive glances into the darkened doorways, seeing things she would rather have never witnessed in her life.

It was as if all the mad visions of hell had been brought here by some mad artist, bent on increasing the effect of the work through sheer, bloody-minded, overkill. Here was a Boschian world of twisted bodies, bent over wooden cranes, stretched tight on racks, twisted on tables whose specifications had been designed, solely, to elicit the most excruciating, exacting pain from the forms

Suede ducked behind a corner, just in time to avoid being struck by the hooked claws of Cousin Darryl. The razor tips dug

a line of claw marks as the mountain pulled his hand back. Suede, only a step ahead, ducked into a room that seemed no bigger than a closet, and slammed the door behind.

She quickly twisted the small, hook-shaped silver lock. It might hold him off for a few moments.

In front of her, a very fat, nude woman, whom she had seen once before, in the guise of Nurse Maddox. Now, she was stripped naked, each immense roll of flesh threatening to overwhelm the eye. Around her neck was a necklace affair adorned with severed animal heads. On the floor, just below her ponderous shadow, was the slick, wet remains of a butchered dog. From the look of it, Nurse Maddox was using the blood and viscera of the dead beast to slick her thighs.

“And just where do you think you’re going, missy?” Nurse Maddox screamed, her eyes twin embers of burning wrath. Suede stood for a moment, too dumbfounded to speak. Then, she heard the clawing at the door, and the sound of feet stamping the wooden frame.

The gross, obese woman twisted one fat, jeweled finger into her face. The nail was painted black. Suede didn’t know whether to laugh or scream.

“You’ll never leave here alive. We like you, the pretty ones. Well, everyone likes the pretty ones, correct? Correct? But when the Dark Wave have finished with you, you won’t be so pretty anymore. Not, at least, by any normal standards...” She trailed off, hefted her enormous, sagging breasts with her small hands, and sent the severed heads bouncing against her marshmallow flesh.

“Aren’t I beautiful?”

Suede suddenly punched her, as hard and quickly as she could manage, directly in the center of her face, and watched, with not a little amazement, as the massive body began to tumble downward. Behind her, the doorframe began to crack under the massive kicking thrusts of Cousin Darryl, and she could hear his hooked claws dig into the wood. She decided, for a moment, that

she most probably was dreaming.

The fat woman collapsed in a billowing heap of gibbering flesh. Suede was too frightened to move near her for a moment. It was stunning. *Jesus*, she thought, *I didn't hit her that hard*.

There was a window, a small window near the ceiling. Suede bounded across the floor, within an inch of the lying body, and got one foot onto the top of a small metal bookcase before she felt a vice-like grip bear down upon one of her ankles. She screamed in intense agony, and turned.

What she saw then would stay with her for the rest of her life.

A snake-like thing had attached itself to her leg, coiled around her shoe like a dripping python, and was pulling her backward. This snake had come from the mouth of the fat woman, Nurse Maddox, as her chalk white blubber began to melt away from the bones and drip, in semi-liquid blobs, across the linoleum.

Suddenly, a torrent of yellow vomit began to gush from the curling lips of the woman, as the sickening tentacle kept its hold on her. She turned, holding onto the edge of the bookcase, and knocking it over beneath her as he fought. The torrent of yellow vomit splattered her jeans, burning into her skin like some mysterious acid, and Suede realized, for the first time tonight, that she was going to, most probably die.

A sickening odor of decay, of death and burning flesh and electrical fire, seemed to fill the room. Suede fought against the grip of the writhing tentacle, finally, in desperation, digging her fingers into the moist, squishy matter of it, until it burst, like some jellified tumor, leaving bits of caustic gore to soak into her fingers.

Suddenly, as the wooden door crashed open, revealing the monstrous form of the feather-clad maniac as he charged in for the kill, the writhing tentacle, still spurting gristle from its wounded side, seemed to retract into the gaping, dead mouth. Suede fought to regain her feet, but then, suddenly, she could no

longer move, for she beheld a sight so utterly beyond the bounds of human belief, that she was captured in wonder by the grotesqueness of the nightmare image that erupted before her.

The head of Nurse Maddox split, like some rotten fruit, into two halves. And out of the glistening, wet cavity of her brain, thick, hairy extremities seemed to thrust outward, and a hideous yellow approximation of a spider crawled its way from out of the blubber where it was borne.

Cinder suddenly felt the small, bony, filthy hand of Ricky reach out and grasp her own.

“No time to linger now! Come on!”

She started forward with him, and the two ran down the length of the hall, turned the corner, and all that Cinder could think of now, with every step was, *I’m dead and this is Hell...I’m dead and this is Hell...I’m dead and this is Hell...*

Suddenly, Ricky stopped stone cold in his tracks. Cinder looked ahead in the darkness. Huge, hooded shapes loomed before them. She knew then, that it really was the end.

Chapter 2

Cinder rolled her eyes open and looked as the sun began to drift through the slightly-parted filmy white curtain. She sat up in bed, felt her forehead in the receding gloom, and groaned. *Oh my god*, she thought, *I have never had a fucking dream like that before.*

She slid to the side of the bed, hugged herself; shivered. The world still hadn’t come back to the same crystal-clarity which reinforces for us, the whole of humanity, the feeling that we are now awake, in reality, the physical world. She wanted a cigarette very badly, and wasn’t sure she had any left. What time was it? How long had she been asleep?

She got up from the bed slowly, her mind still abuzz and aflutter with the tenuous grasp of dream imagery. It had been

horrible. She had been kidnapped, her family killed by maniacs. She had been imprisoned in a mental home. But it was far worse than just that, she knew. There had been monsters there--hideous things--vile and grotesque abstractions dripping with hideous grue. Also, she had, apparently, been a *lesbian*.

She was dizzy as she walked across the carpet of her bedroom. But she was thankful, as anyone who manages to escape, unscathed from the kingdom of nightmares is, when, finally, they are able to escape from the clutches of their respective torments.

But here she was, amidst the familiar, comforting things that she knew to be the truth of her life: her canopy bed, with pink sheets, her teddy bears and stuffed animals, her make-up mirror and rock music posters. John Lennon watched over her now, his wise mellow eyes hidden behind little round, rimless glasses. He shared wall space with a black and white poster of an electronic musician who extolled the twin virtues of war and Social Darwinism. She crept to the closet door, thrust her hand inside, got her robe, and began to tiptoe out onto the upstairs landing.

The house was quiet, dim; the sunset painted orange strokes across the downstairs walls, making the downstairs living room into a patchwork of shadow and light to which Cinder fought to adjust her vision as she went down the stairs slowly. Where was Julia and Daddy? Had they taken Bonny out. Or something? She went into the kitchen, looked around, found some cigarettes Julia had stowed away in the cupboard, reached into the fridge, took out a cola, popped the tab, sat down, lit up, got back up, rooted around for an ashtray, and held her head in her hand, smoking.

She was disoriented, and she had no idea why. Dream images were still playing around her consciousness. The world of waking life seemed to her, right now, to teeter, dangerously close, to the world of fantasy.

She heard some rumbling upstairs, realized Julia must, at

least, be home, and quickly stubbed the cigarette out, dousing the ashtray with water and setting it back on the counter. She heard Julia come downstairs, heard her huff a little, turn on the stereo to some quiet music... Was she getting ready to go out?

Suddenly, the kitchen door swung in, and Julia entered, saw Cinder sitting there, seemed faintly surprised, and then reached up absent-mindedly to adjust an earring.

"Hey Cin," she said, faintly. Cinder could hear a note of apprehension in her voice.

"Hey," she returned, glumly. She eyed Julia warily, wondering where the hell she was going.

"Y--your father is working late tonight... Bobby is with the special sitter... and I, uh, am going out with some friends. Can you fend for yourself tonight?"

Cinder nodded. She didn't think Julia was dressed so elegantly for a date with "friends". She looked like she was going to be the main attraction at an all-star slut-a-thon. Bitch.

"You're dressed, ah... awful nice."

"Thanks."

Julia rooted around in the cabinet, found the cigarettes that Cinder had just been smoking, said, "I see you've been helping yourself to my smokes, huh Cin? You know what I always tell you: 'If you quit while you can--'"

"--I'll be quitting *when* I can.' I know."

Cinder finished Julia's words as the woman nervously flitted about the kitchen, too timid, still, to make her exit until she could think of a way to make it seem smooth, flawless; to make it seamless in Cinder's mind.

"So is it your boss you're fucking? Or somebody else?"

Cinder could see Julia's back go stuff, as her head popped up. She turned, her jaws tight and stiff, and her eyes shooting sparks of hatred and indignation.

"YOU" she said, in an icy, rigid voice, but with perfect, practiced control, "are getting to be too big for your britches young lady. Too fucking big... You're not too big, though, to be

grounded for a little while. Or a long while, for that matter.”

Cinder breathed in heavily, stood up, said, “What the hell would you ground me for, Julia? For being loyal to my father, when I see that, apparently, his wife has, ah, *an engagement* for the evening...what am I supposed to do, just pretend you’re not what we both know you are? A fucking whore--”

Cinder felt the cold, raspy flesh of Julia’s bony hand smack against her cheek, and felt the sting crackling up her jaw and into her forehead. Her skin was throbbing. Immediately, she reared back her own hand and slapped Julia’s skinny, high cheek-boned face as hard as she could.

“You fucking bitch!”

“You fucking brat!”

Cinder was pulled down to the floor, rolling on the linoleum. Julia jumped on her. She was a skinny, tough bitch, was Julia, and she had had more than enough fat lip from Cinder for the time being. The two struggled, rolling around on the kitchen floor in a heated, profanity-filled catfight.

“You better fucking apologize for that, you little brat! You little bitch! Bill spoiled you rotten. I told him we should have--*AHH!*”

Cinder grabbed a handful of hair, and Julia struck out with her bunched fist. Her frail body was wring and wet with sweat, and she gasped for air as Cinder managed to turn her on her skinny, heaving back, and hold her down with both hands.

“If we keep this up, we’ll either be fighting or...”

“Or fucking?”

Julia’s voice rang out icily in the cold, dark chasm that Cinder had fallen into. Suddenly, she felt as if she were lying in some dark, great hall, holding bundles of brittle leaves in her hand, brushing them away as they blew past.

“Hey! Hey, you...wake the hell up!”

Cinder jumped. She was sitting up. There was a very worried, fortyish-looking woman standing in front of her, holding

some sort of spiral-bound manual. She looked around blearily. She was in school.

“You fell asleep, *man*...”

The black boy that had nudged her arm looked like he was somewhere between concern and good-natured mockery. The teacher (was it Grabnitz? She thought that Mrs. Grabnitz had passed away last summer.) looked like she might either laugh or scorn...she did neither, but instead asked.

“Cin...Cin, are you feeling okay?”

She rubbed her eyes, looked around her. She felt the dim sense of something being infinitely wrong, out of place, but she brushed the thought aside easily, and said, groggily:

“Yeah...sure, everything is fine. Just fell asleep, is all.”

The probable Mrs. Grabnitz pursed her withered lips, puckered her face, and retorted, “Well, try and see if you can make it for the rest of class, Cin. This is very important material we’re covering here...it will be on the *final* exam. *In a week*. Hm?”

Cinder tried hard to remember, exactly, the particulars concerning the Battle of Antietam.

She walked through the bustling high school halls in a daze, still lost in the vast thoroughfare of her own dreaming mind. She crept along the halls, looking at faces she half-remembered from years of nodding acquaintance: Becky Margraves, who had once stolen her boyfriend, Pete Van Horne, whom she had had a horrible, unfulfilled crush on for awhile, while in junior high... she barely realized where she was going, but instead every foot fall seemed to be dragging her out the door, and into the streets.

School buses line the road, kids gabbled in little knots here and there; nerds dreamed hot dreams and stole terrified glances at cheerleaders they would never cuddle with except in the fevered recesses of their most forbidden dreams. She was oblivious to it all. The afternoon sun was bright, going to dim. She looked up at the flagpole and realized that America was still America.

She walked down the sidewalk. Someone spoke to her, she

turned, and she realized that they had really spoken to someone else. She hefted her book bag, breathed in deeply, and felt like the world might give out from under her at any moment.

She trudged through the neighborhoods, houses mostly gone to seed, sporting cars in the driveway that looked as if they were held together with rust. Hadn't she driven to school today? She couldn't remember. She couldn't, really, get any kind of a grip on herself.

It was several blocks of aimless wandering later when a truck pulled up beside her, an old red pickup with some sort of ladder rig in the back.

"Hey. Hey girl, you need a ride?"

Cinder looked up. A woman with chin-length black hair and handsome face had pulled up beside her, and rested one massive forearm on the rolled down window, steering with the other hand.

Cinder stopped, looked around, and before she knew it, said, "Yes...that would be great."

Cinder slipped in the passenger side door, warily. The woman looked safe enough, but she had always been taught never to accept rides from strangers. But, for some reason, today the normal rules didn't seem to apply.

"My name's Cinder."

"I'm Suede. Suede O'Donnell. Where do you live at Cinder?"

For a moment, Cinder wasn't precisely sure. Her head still seemed to be full of sand.

"Oh...uh, Shady Acres."

"Nice," the woman said, a little amusedly "Do you usually walk all the way back and forth to school from there?"

Cinder laughed a little, pulled her hair back with one hand, and could feel the woman's eyes play over her face.

"No. Not usually."

The woman snorted, and said, "I mean, Jesus, that is along, fucking way. You're lucky I decided to stop."

Then:

“What? Get in an argument with your boyfriend or something? Is that why you’re walking?”

Pause

“I mean, hell, it’s not any of my business. I mean, I’m just a natural snoop okay?” The woman shrugged her shoulders,

“I don’t usually stop and ask wayward girls if they need a lift, ya understand, its just that, well, you looked sort of lost, I guess.”

Cinder leaned against the windshield, looking at as the houses and street signs whizzed by in a blur. She said: “No...it’s okay. I guess I just wasn’t feeling that well.”

Silence.

Cinder turned and looked at the woman. She actually wasn’t quite as old as what she had first thought. And darn cheery to be with, too. She felt herself brighten a little.

“In fact, I don’t have a boyfriend at all...I mean, it’s just that men are so hard to understand...ya’ know?”

The woman looked perplexed for a moment, then said, “Yeah...men. They’re all like that. I, uh, I totally see where you’re coming from with that, Cin. I mean, all most guys want is *abem*...well, I think you, *by this time*...”

Both women started to spontaneously laugh. Cinder could feel her spirits begin to lift.

Suede pulled up into the driveway of Cinder’s home, said, “Gorgeous house”, and looked indecisive for a moment.

“Thank you.”

“Well...here you are.”

“Here I am.”

“And I suppose...hey, what kind of food do you like?”

Cinder was silent for a moment, and then smiling said, “Thai.”

The woman looked indecisive again for a fleeting moment, revved her engine, and then turned again as Cinder was getting

out, and asked,

“Hey Cin, how old are you?”

“Eighteen. Why?”

Silence.

“Because I sure as hell would hate to have to try and beat a nasty rap of statutory rape. As the song goes. Maybe you haven’t heard it?”

Silence. Cinder could feel herself blush. She stopped with one leg outside on the pavement, and one butt cheek still on the seat.

“You, ah, you want to go get some Thai food with me sometime?”

“Sure.”

Pause.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Here, lemme give you my number. Cinder opened her book bag, thrust her hand inside for the battered school notebook, and ripped out a half a page of paper. The women busily exchanged numbers. Suede looked both exhilarated and a little guilty all at the same time.

“Hey, Suede, by the way: how old are you?”

“Old enough. Give me a call. We’ll do lunch.”

Cinder waved by, her heart hammering a little, and her adrenalin suddenly coursing. She stopped on the porch, turned, and waved as Suede backed out, cranked the radio up to ear-splitting decibels, and zoomed away into the late afternoon.

Cinder turned put her key in the door, turned the knob, opened it and immediately her spirits sank into the pit of her stomach. There were no lights on, and the dimness of twilight seemed to coalesce here in the confines of her familiar old living room, into inky pools and dips of blackness. She could feel the temperature drop, perceptibly, several degrees. She suddenly felt fear. Something was wrong.

She walked inside, called out, “Julia? Hello? Anybody here?”

She hadn't thought to look in the garage to see if the red car was there...Daddy always took the other one to the office with him, and *he* was probably working late. Where the hell was Julia? Cinder suddenly remembered her dream.

"Hello?"

She could feel the same lost, empty feeling grip the pit of her stomach again. She struggled to remember if they had told her she might be coming home to an empty house tonight. She found she could remember next to nothing concerning the early part of the day. She suddenly felt like her head was full of fog, again...

Her voice took on a tremulous quality. She called out for an answer again, and received only the pale echo of her own downtrodden voice. Then, suddenly:

"Cinder...I'm here, Cin."

Daddy was upstairs. Why hadn't he come down when he heard her come through the front door?

"Daddy! Oh, thank god, I was wondering where everyone was at."

She suddenly saw a go on in the hall upstairs, and she went up quickly.

"Da--"

Bill was sitting on his bed upstairs, with a book of family photos spread out on his lap. He barely picked up his head to look at her as she entered the room.

"Hey Punky," he said. Cinder went to him. Put her arms around him, began sobbing.

He looked like he had aged a hundred years since she had last seen him. His eyes seemed yellow, misty, and his skin looked old and dry and his hairline looked as if it had receded even further back from his scalp. She kissed him savagely, asked, "What's wrong, D-Daddy?"

He held her close to him, looked down at his family album, and said, sadly, "So many memories...Punky. Do you remember when you were a little girl, how you wanted me to get you a pony,

so badly? Do you remember? Do you remember your first haircut? Your baby teeth falling out? Do you remember drinking hot chocolate on cold evenings, snuggled up together?”

She began to really bawl now. She could feel the sheer heaviness of his thoughts weigh down upon her with killing, intense grief.

“Yes, D-D-D-Daddy! *I remember!*”

“You know Punky, you have to enjoy life while you can...make every single minute count, as if it were your last minute on earth...because, Punky, the good times, they don’t last forever. One day, it’s all over, and the memories are all that remain...” He turned to her.

“I know it’s been hard for you to accept your stepmother...and, maybe, that’s the way it should be. When your mother died, a part of me died as well. I loved your mother more than anything else in the world, and she loved me and you and Bobby so much...I want to tell you, I don’t blame you a bit for what happened. It’s just one of those things. And now, Bobby is gone, and so is Julia...and all we have left, like a bunch of faded pictures, or a bunch of old dead leaves in the fall, are our memories...Do you understand, Punky?”

Tears streamed down her face as she sat beside him on the bed. She clutched him tight to her, surprised, suddenly, at how weak he felt, how frail; it was as if every bit of life was being drained out of him as they wept together in the stifling dark of that bedroom.

“Oh Daddy, I l-l-love...”

“I love you to, Punky. But not even love can stop the ticking of the clocks...”

He rose suddenly, and she saw him wander to the bedroom door, his gait slow and ponderous. She rose suddenly, went to him, implored, “*Daddy...D-Daddy, whatever it is, it will be okay...*” She sobbed, reaching out to pull him toward her. He looked back at her gravely, his eyes lost; defeated.

Suddenly he began to melt into the blackness of the

doorway, dissolve like smoke. One step, and he was gone. Cinder rushed out into the hall, but he had already disappeared, and she was alone, in the dark, same as always.

Chapter 3

She had come back to consciousness, and decided that she was still dreaming.

It was vast web in which she found herself captured, bound in sticky bonds that wrapped her like some strange, modern mummy. She cast her eyes about her in a frenzy of fear. Several wriggling lumps told her she would share her fate with others.

Beneath her, in the circle of orange glow cast by various mounted torches and fires, Cinder could make out the shuffling figures of hooded people. Beings. Strange things that slithered and crept; great tall, white freaks with legs like stilts moved about in shimmering, rag-like gowns. Their heads were little more than ugly, misshapen lumps. The world had opened up and spat out the denizens from the kingdom of nightmares.

She struggled to free herself, but every tiny perceptible movement seemed to strengthen the grip of the suffocating sticky strands that adhered to her flesh. She quit in exhaustion, letting her head fall limp onto her breast, her hair covering her falling over her forehead and hiding the visions of madness that gathered below.

A great altar had been erected upon a massive pile of bones and ash, and robed people holding torches. Below her, they had begun the chant that would open the portal between the worlds, and let in the alien trash beyond the Seven Fold Gate--beings of wondrous and indescribable grotesque beauty. They would come, drawn by the energy of the living, and the Devil and His children would rule the world again, as they had in days of old.

Cinder recognized the voice of the robed, horned priest

who held court below her, amidst his devoted coven of human and semi-human monsters. It was Dr. Elmer.

He raised his hands, one holding a twisted sword shaped like a tongue of fire, and intoned, “ Oh great wanderers of the Outer Spheres, we beseech thee this night, in the name of all that is unholy, appear! Move, be friendly unto us, your servants, so mote it be!”

“So mote it be!” intoned the robed followers, as Dr. Elmer, the High Priest crept to the altar, murmuring in a language Cinder did not understand.

Upon the altar he placed the sword, and removed a heavy silver chalice, which he held to his lips and drank from, before passing to the rest of his followers. Cinder could tell that the coven was made up of many of the people she had known as “staff” at Holloway House. Suddenly, from some unseen system of speakers, a deep, sonorous purr of organ music seemed to bellow forth, mixed with wild harmonies of flute and beating of drum. The High Priest turned, and seemed, for the first time, to notice the tall, strange forms that were, quietly, assembling at the edges of the torchlight.

“Come! Come!” He cried, holding up his arms as if to embrace the freakish things in an all-encompassing grasp. “Come, to rule and reign once more! *Ave Satanis! The Air has won!*”

A shuffling, flapping, slithering, shrieking cacophony began to emanate from all corners of the great, cavernous ritual chamber, as spectral shapes began to appear and coalesce into a series of ever-baffling and monstrous abnormalities, just hidden from sight. Cinder trembled, feeling the great web into which she had been thrust tighten as if the very strands of web themselves were alive and imbued with some malignant and hateful spirit. She felt her thoughts begin to shatter like glass bulbs.

The strange chanting grew louder, and Cinder could see phantasmal mists flutter around her form. The mist would, from moment to moment, begin to shift into the pattern of a horrifying, screaming face, before dissolving again into a

billowing, nightmare current.

Below her, the mad cult droned into ecstasy, their macabre chants strange uttering rising to an operatic crescendo with the music, as a veritable parade of hideous oddities began to assemble in the chamber: vast living globules of bizarre, geometrical form, mad writhing octopi that slithered and crept from the foul nether regions beyond cosmic space, skinless voyagers whose inner organs adorned their bodies with vital tubes held in place by pins and hooks and stitches and wire...it was an assembly of the damned and demented. Not even an Hieronymous Bosch could have conceived of so macabre and gorgeous a spectacle.

The dust began to blow from the ground, and in the darkness before her, above the ritual chamber, somewhere in the center of the dark ceiling of this accursed cavern, the swirling mists began to form themselves into a shifting, prismatic tunnel of colored light, and a strange, howling wind, marked by the muttering and babblings of countless millions of invisible visitors who sought the bosom of pain and pleasure in the world that belonged to man.

"COME!" Dr. Elmer exalted, and then turned, yelling to his understudy, "Zeena! Fetch The Mountain...Have him bring forth our sacrifice..."

The hooded Zeena darted into the darkness behind the altar, and opened a hidden door. After a few moments, the great walking mountain joined the others, dragging a flailing, familiar female shape by a rope rapped around her hands.

Suede had come back to consciousness while being carried upon the reeking back of the walking, feather-covered freak. She instantly began to kick and claw, pounding his back and pulling away globs of greasy and feathers, filthy strings of his rotting clothing, and what must have been fungous, encrusted skin.

She kicked and yelled savagely, eliciting only a few whooping grunts from her captor, who had taken her into the strange ritual room where, once, Mrs. Holloway had held sway.

Then, through a secret entrance into the subterranean chambers that stretched beneath Holloway and deep into the sordid dwellings of the earth.

She hammered him mercilessly with her arms and legs, perched atop his massive shoulder like a bundle of straw. She began to thrash madly, trying to break free from the iron band of his arm as it held her in place.

“You fucking motherfucking freak! You’d better let me go or so help me I’ll--Ahhh!”

A slicing pain shot up the back of her leg, and she realized that the freak had reached up and cut her with one of the twisted metal claws that’s served him in place of his misshapen lumps of hands.

She was thrown down unto a pile of refuse, and the great mountain of a being disappeared into the darkness. She bent to examine her leg, pulled back a hand slicked with blood, and then bolted upward and back, as she suddenly realized that she had been laid down on a pile of ash and bone.

“Help!” She suddenly cried, in mad frustration. “Somebody, for the love of God! Please--”

“He won’t do anything to help you, dear. Not now.”

Suede spun around, could just make out the hooded shape of blond, attractive woman in the darkness.

“I’m Zeena, Priestess of *He Who Cannot Be Named*. Welcome.”

“F-fuck you! What...are you going to do to me?”

The woman turned, placed her hands on her hips in satisfaction, and seemed to consider a distant rumbling that seemed to be getting louder with each moment.

She turned again, her pale skin almost luminescent in the darkness.

“Not us. Wait.”

A moment later, forms emerged from the darkness, and bound her more quickly than she ever thought would have been possible. She was dragged then, by the great hulking freak, out a

narrow door, and into the mouth of madness.

Chapter 4

The Overseer was feeling pretty good.

In fact, wonderful. An ecstasy beyond comparison. Now, it was time, and oblivion would begin. His kind would issue forth, from the dark recesses of the Seven Fold Gate, and Man would cease to be the master of this Earth domain. It would bridge the gap between the divided nature of consciousness--to bring the light and darkness together; to tie them like the ends of a divine ribbon, so that they might never be torn asunder again. This would be the culmination of his eons of suffering endeavor, from one side of the Astral Dreamscape to another.

He suddenly found himself standing atop the altar made of bone, in the ritual chamber that these pesky, tiny fools that worshipped him had constructed here, in this abysmal cavernous dwelling that he called home. Below him, a vessel that considered itself worthy enough to masquerade as his servant was busily invoking all the energies he could muster, maximizing the moment of his oblivion. The Overseer could grok it even as he stood there.

His insects fell to their knees in adulation. Around them, his brethren from the lower depths paraded on living feet; twisted and garish and grotesque and horrifying and beautiful, they were feeling their way back to physical existence; back to the flesh.

Below, chained like some slave off a cargo ship, the blood sacrifice groveled at the altar in terror. In a moment, they would cut her throat, and commence an orgy in her blood, to satiate him. Repulsive. The thought of humans copulating was enough to make him queasy.

“Oh my Lord! I beseech thee this night of all nights, to--
AHHH!”

The Overseer reached down from the altar with one immense claw and ripped the head off of Dr. Elmer. It detached

from the neck with a sucking pop, and sprayed blood in a torrent that washed the clean white bone of the altar red.

Pandemonium erupted, as, one by one, the other worshippers were seized in massive claws, gripped by writhing tentacles, ripped clean of their flesh, and devoured by soldiers of madness whose heads were somewhere between that of feral dogs and giant insects. The Overseer began to laugh, really, truly laugh, with the mirth of a child, as he felt himself slip the wave pattern that kept him solidly in his present form, and changed it consciously to one that accommodated him much more. His massive frame folded, hairy legs ripped themselves clean from his gibbering flesh, and he felt the pleasure of slowly metamorphosing into the immense, arachnid form that was to his greatest liking. And there was *such* a lovely web to climb.

Suede crawled through the dust and blood, finally getting to her feet, and dodging through the mass of twisting macabre figures toward the edges of the web on the wall. Up there, just a few feet, she could see several lumpy forms that had been wrapped into the webs. All were dead, she knew, save for one, whose face she could see in the flickering glare of torchlight. That form still moved, faintly, writhed in muffled agony, and she meant to free it.

She grabbed a torch that had fallen in the melee, ran with it toward the edge of the web, and looked up. Above, just beyond her reach, was Cinder. She began to rip at the strands, felt them wrap themselves, like living snakes, around her fingers, and clench.

She put the torch to the strands and heard a piercing wail. They began to recede in pain, and she burned them away.

Goddamn it, goddamn it, I'm going to live through this to tell about it. And so are you!

She began to burn and claw at the sickening strands, and yet they seemed to multiply, to seek her form; they shot out and grasped her clothing and hair. She was in a mad fight against an inhuman enemy.

Behind her the screams began to die away, as the last of the worshippers were pulled apart, hacked apart, tortured, skinned, and mutilated for the amusement of the monstrous chorus of celebrants that were steadily filling this accursed place. Suede was now captured in a grasping maw of the white, writhing strands, began to scream, and kick.

The Overseer crept from his place, and began to gorge himself on the blood and terror that were at his feet. His brethren parted in respect. Here was the one that had liberated them from bondage; now, there would be only nightmares, and never daydreams. Now, the world would quake in the agony of her most grotesque fears and delirious torments. This was their finest hour.

Suede had dropped the torch; it burned miserably at her feet as she clawed and kicked and screamed. It began to pull her up, inching her upward, to become another of the mummified flies' that were, apparently, its nourishment. She thrust her head backward in panic; the world had slowed down into a dizzying panorama of images.

A gigantic--an enormous--spider was creeping toward her. A creature so big it defied the senses. Behind it, amid the gore and carnage, all the demons of hell stood in rapt wonder, holding their chains and pincers, and all the instruments of their arcane craft of punishment in readiness.

"Out! Out demon, out!"

A crystal clear voice seemed to break the mad cacophony of utterances like the clear tolling of a bell. Suddenly, the spider retreated, skittered its massive bulk around in an almost comic mockery of human surprise, and watched as its legions parted, letting the one who had spoke forth stand before the Master.

"You! *Ze'blod Na'ggakai T'ahulu!*"

Galls stood in the middle of the blood-soaked floor, his finger held up accusingly.

A gurgling, sepulchral voice erupted from the Spider:

"You...This is no business of yours, Galls...The time is late. The Clocks have stopped. We...rule...*again*..."

The Overseer crept forward, and Galls held up one ancient, gnarled finger in reproach.

“Do not test my authority. Of all the denizens of the Outer Planes, you should know that best, my friend.”

The Overseer considered.

“ Yes. We were friends once. Now, it is a pity, situations being what they are, we must forgo our mutual admiration and play on opposite sides of the game. I find it helps to be philosophical about these things.”

“Yes. You may have a point there...” Galls scratched his chin in a repose for a moment, and then flew forward with a valkyrie screech, grasping the giant spider in his arms.

Suddenly, the devils erupted into a riot of panic, and Suede felt the ropy bonds that squeezed her suddenly retract in seeming terror. Dry husks--drained and withered bodies--fell around her. And Cinder, who had been just inched from her grasp, fell on top of her head, knocking her into the dirt.

She rolled out from under the dead weight of the girl, ferociously pulling off the dead strands of web and flinging them aside, and put her hand on Cinder's chest. She didn't know for a moment whether or not the girl still lived, but she had no time to wonder. She scooped her up in harms, carrying her burden easily, and began to run through the riot of shifting forms.

Winged beasts swooped over her head; rioting gargoyles ran in every direction, screeching in wonder and terror, fearing that the jig might well be up. Suede ran headlong into the darkness, not daring to look back at the horrid scene she had left behind.

She could hear the thump of footfalls though, just behind her.

It ran with the frenzy of a wounded animal. The Mountain, still covered in its cloak of shit and feathers and blood and death, had come alive like a stampeding elephant, trailing gabbled, screaming nonsense in its wake.

Suede plunged into the dark recesses of the labyrinthine corridors; she still held the body of Cinder in her arms, and her heart and fear were pumping wildly through veins that felt as if they pumped solid adrenalin. She felt the breath in her lungs grow hot through exertion; felt her chest heave with fear and terror.

Behind her, it lunged, a gigantic mad beast, as hell bent on destruction as if it had been a predator tracking its food through a jungle. One swing of its mighty steel claws sent spark shooting from the rough stone walls of the corridors. She was within striking distance.

She stumbled along in front of the mountain, her knees hitting the floor in mod-stride, and she, somehow, managing to right herself and keep going. The fear inside of her drove her onward, with Cinder in her arms, looking for some glimmer of light that might lead to an escape.

Its brain was exploding in its filthy, lice-infested head.

The blood-urge was possessing it, and these two had far-outlived their usefulness as playthings. No, it reckoned it was time to take their blood. It felt the need for vengeance.

It turned for a moment, and cast it's glance backward. Behind it, in the ritual chamber, all hell was breaking loose. It could hear the screams and shrieks, the pounding of feet, and the slithering of tentacles, and the clomp of hooves. But what did it matter to it? Those Big Ones were about their petty business, and so was It. It cast its gaze forward into the darkness. Where had the pretty one run to, with her armful of fresh meat and her mouth full of screams and foul words? It sniffed the air, but all that It could smell was itself.

This body it wore had once been a great, gross oaf of a backward farm boy. Now, it was all predator. Now, it belonged to the Dark Wave. It crouched for a moment, trying to glean a murmur of breathing.

Suede ran madly, her heart beating wildly in her chest, her

arms about to give. Finally, she collapsed against the inside of a jutting stone arch. Cinder was still limp in her arms.

Suede checked her pulse, and then Cinder's. The girl, for all she knew, may be in some sort of shock-induced coma. She leaned back against the rough stone wall, trying to control the gasping of her breath.

She had to shut out the insane, unbelievable things she had witnessed tonight...mustn't, in fact, think about them, until she found both of them the hell out of this house of madness. She stifled the choking phlegm in her lungs, and crouched low to the ground, spied around the corner, looking for their pursuer.

The cold, isolated darkness, had perceptibly began to lift. A strange, blue mist seemed to be building; a luminescent bath of illumination that was slowly beginning to brighten the corridors, until the rough details of their surfaces could be seen clearly.

It was a strange tapestry of carvings, that crawled across the wall like an epic; beasts indescribable and monstrous, with many appendages and heads, and tall, alien forms that stood heroic, and vast heavenly boats that ascended to other worlds, and hieroglyphic markings the meanings of which she could not begin to guess.

Then she saw something begin to form in the air. And she screamed as she never had before in her entire life.

Within the ritual chamber, amidst the splashes of gore, and the refuse of macabre butchery, The Overseer felt sure that he had, finally, wrestled victory from the jaws of defeat.

Galls was bound in a coil of sucking webs that seemed to be draining him dry of every last fragment of his existence. He had grown to over ten feet tall in the first few moments, but, even as he wrestled the Overseer, pulling apart his legs and burning his fists in the pulpy flesh of his back, web after web was shot at him until, at last, he was on the verge of a mortal death.

The ritual chamber was now a vast madness of webbings; creatures that had not departed beyond these walls when the

initial struggle had commenced, were now caught like tiny insects in the killing strands. Many of them hung suspended from ever-increasing strands, their energy drained, inadvertently, by The Overseer, who nonetheless was damn happy to have the extra juice.

Galls had started to rot where he hung; his flesh grew old, withered; it began to flake away from his face. His battle was over, thought The Overseer, who told him, in his most polite, and patient appellation, that further struggle was useless.

Galls knew he would die here. The idea didn't bother him. He needed a little time away from his duties.

"Mr. Galls, we do have to quit meeting under such difficult circumstances. One of these days, let's hope, we can afford to be more cordial to each other."

Galls felt the life drain from him; felt the skin of his lips wither and crumble, but managed, "Yes, it is a shame, old boy. But, however, you seem to be suffering under the delusion that, somehow, you've defeated me."

The Overseer climbed his way on top of Galls head, squatted, and shot forth another volley of webs. He felt, suddenly, wary.

"Haven't I, though? I mean, look around you, old boy. The Gate has swung wide, and you haven't managed to stop even one of our brethren from coming forth and escaping into the night...Even now, they begin to fill this world of men and dreams, to turn it into a world of Our Kind...a world of eternal darkness, and beautiful, unending nightmare. Can't you see what I have accomplished, in this short space of time? Old fool, you should bow before me, and thank me."

The bone-thin body beneath him began to convulse, and the reply was stopped short for a moment by a hacking cough. Galls flesh was melting away from his skull like wax.

He smiled; a hideous, deaths-head grin. Suddenly, The Overseer knew why.

"Not quite," he croaked, and collapsed into a pile of

moldering bones.

Suddenly, she stopped screaming. She was now too fascinated to even fear; she was seeing something that no mind could, possibly, ever accommodate and remain wholly intact.

In the air before her, floating in the midst of the blue mist, strange twirling bits of flame seemed to erupt from nowhere. They slowly began to circle before her in the corridor, like some microcosmic imitation of the solar system, until finally they conjoined, and began to grow into each other, forming a horrid, glowing, pulsating flesh.

But inside the flesh, also, deep within the crinkles of skin and the folds of grotesque lumps, she marveled to realize she could see another world begin to take shape. A world history even: of marching armies, hideous beasts, great, god-like beings, treachery, and vast vistas of madness that stretched on limitless, as far as the mind could conceive. She was transfixed by the shifting, myriad images, screaming faces, naked wonders, and alien landscapes. In the midst of her hypnosis, the strange being twisted itself into a floating mass of convulsing, jelly-like pulp. Within, she now knew, something was waiting to be born.

Cinder came back to consciousness for a moment, shifting out of the delirium of her nightmares, and awaking in the hazy blue world which was born around her. She tried to raise her arm, but it felt like it must be broken, and she winced in pain. Her body felt as if it were dying. Her hand on the end of her arm looked as if it were ten yards away.

"Suede...I need..."

But her voice was meek. She didn't know that Suede was standing, just out of reach a few feet away. Her arm fell back by her side, she huffed a sigh, and fell backward into darkness again.

It had stomped up and down the corridors, smashing and tearing asunder its own kind that dared step in its way.

Where? Where. It wanted these two. To hell with these Big Ones, if they couldn't see the importance of this. His mind had narrowed down into one white-hot beam of kill, and he needed to spill their blood.

Finally, ahead, he could see something that seemed to shift blue, and flicker for a moment. He squinted in the darkness.

And then, by that same blue light, he found his prey.

Suede still stood there, motionless, in rapt wonder.

She had, never before, seen anything so sickening and beautiful in the same stroke. Flesh and bone; blood and skin; birth and death; sex and necropsy. The maddening thing was enormous now; a true unparallel oddity of occult proportions. It was like all the life that had ever existed fighting, at the same time, to free itself from the same primordial egg.

She suddenly vomited. Reeling over, but barely able to lift her eyes from the spectacle.

It made a mad dash for Suede, its huge footfalls echoing down the corridor, its great metal hook-hands poised to strike, to tear, to rip asunder flesh until all that was left was a piteous, howling mass of blood and grue, begging as it lay on the floor, for It to finish the job. It howled its' monstrous gabbling cluck, and leapt in frenzy.

A tiny, gloved hand reached out and grabbed Suede's just as It came barreling toward her.

She suddenly looked down. A small figure wearing some sort of hooded, rubber garb and a plastic apparatus over its mouth and nose, was imploring her to come with it. Her eyes glazed over. He was far less interesting than what she had been looking at.

Suddenly, she saw, just beyond the rapidly evolving being, the huge shape of the freak with the claw hands; the huge, shambling shape that was covered in filth and feathers. And it was running down the corridor directly towards her.

“Come on!” shrieked the strange little shape. “Don’t look at it! It will drive you mad! That is not just a Big One! Not just a Bigger One! Lady, that’s the *Biggest goddamned--*”

But she had already turned, ducked back into the opposite doorway, retrieved Cinder from where she lay on the floor, and followed the strange little shape into the darkness ahead.

It had run madly into the floating mass of flesh; and it felt itself stuck suddenly, as if it had been immersed in jelly. It struggled, slicing easily through the thick, living matter, almost relishing the feel of the hot, wet pulp that issued forth.

The mass retaliated, covering, encircling; engulfing. It was like a hateful swarm of bees now, and it grew heads and hooked fingers, and skinned faces, and it ate It as surely as a hungry feline devours a rodent.

It even ate the shit-caked boots.

Chapter 5

The small figure had led them to a sort of sliding paneled wall, and Suede had plunged in after still carrying the limp body of Cinder in her arms. The strange little figure in the rubber coat kept up a continual babble of excitement as he led the way, from darkness into greater darkness, saying “At Last! At long last! Ia! Ia! The three-lobed burning eye! The Dark Wave have broken through, but the battle is far from over! Ia!”

The hall had narrowed down into a little tunnel, and Suede could hear the steady rush and slosh of water, and suddenly her feet were wet.

The little figure was nearly lost in the surrounding darkness, but she followed his voice. Suddenly, mixed in with his mad, gleeful exultations, Suede could hear--oh, glorious!--the sound of falling rain.

“Come! Come! There isn’t much time!”

Suddenly, just ahead, she could see the dim, shuffling shape

of the strange little creature begin to clear in the gloom. A peal of thunder and a mad of flash of lightening later, and they were standing beneath the sodden boards of an outside opening.

Suede clambered up slick, filthy stone steps, still heaving the bulk of Cinder in her arms, feeling the rain pelt her face through the crooked, broken boards of the overhead trap. She turned for a moment, and looked at the strange small man.

The bottom half of his face was almost entirely hidden behind the clear plastic oxygen mask, but what she saw of his eyes, his crinkled, greenish skin, and his hunched, shivering shape, restored, for a brief moment, her hope that seem beings, no matter how strange and frightening they appeared to be, were still worthy of love.

She turned, pushed open the rotten wooden planks above, pounded upward, and into the pouring rain.

She ran down the slick, wet, muddy hill, not daring to look back. Whoever--or whatever--her guide out had been, it had managed to bring her through to an opening on the other side of the fence.

She carried the inert body in her arms through the pouring gale, finally making her way back to her car, not stopping, for once, to think of the madness she had just witnessed, but simply moving forward with the thankfulness of a dreamer who has just awoken from the grips of an interminable, punishing nightmare.

She thrust Cinder as quickly and gently as she could on the passenger side seat, and then ran around the car, jumped into the driver seat, and reached under the seat.

"Aw shit! Aw fucking shit! Where in the hell are they?"

Her fingers fought the empty space beneath the seat.

"Gotcha!"

Finally, they managed to seize upon the bundle of keys viciously> She pulled them out, fumbled with them for a panicked moment, then got the car started. She gassed the engine, pulled into reverse, fought down the urge to start screaming, and sped away into the night. Toward a hospital. Toward sanity.

“No one is ever going to believe this shit. NO--ONE--IS--EVER--GOING--TO--BELIEVE--THIS--SHIT!” She began to scream and laugh and cry all at the same time. She tried to shove the images of the last few hours away in a safe place. Before she broke down in shock, she had to get them to safety.

The rain pummeled the windshield. She was driving like a maniac. She forced herself to slow down; tried to calm her racing pulse. She thought they were probably safe now, at least, out her on the road.

Cinder stirred in the driver seat, moaned. Suede looked over at her. Good. Maybe the poor thing would be alright, What in hell had hey just witnessed happen in there? She sure as hell didn’t know. Maybe someone had managed to slip them both L.S.D. The events , already, seemed to be taking on a strange, half-dream quality.

“But it was no goddamned dream,” she said, out loud.

Suddenly Cinder screamed, doubled over, vomited on the floor of the car. Suede reached over, put her hand on her shoulder, said, “It’s okay baby. Everything...is going to be okay. Let it go. Get it out of you. We’re safe now.

Suddenly, the girl sat back up straight. She put her hand out, and touched Suede’s arm. Suede looked, glanced down at the arm, and realized that something was still wrong. Very wrong. Cinder was most definitely not going to be okay.

The skin looked as if ants were crawling underneath it.

Suede screamed and the car swerved into the blackness by the side of the road.

The world faded out into darkness for awhile. Blissfully unawares, her consciousness seemed to float in a pool of black.

When she awoke, it was with the increasing realization that she lay, immobile, in a bed. And, though her pain had obviously been dulled with massive doses of morphine, she was still aware of its coming and goings, increasingly, by the hour.

It was sometime, in and out of a semi-conscious state,

before she was able to talk with her nurses.

They came in to feed her, she being able, finally, to keep down solid food. Both of her arms were in casts. The Nurses and morphine, at least, were nice.

It was maybe a month before she was started, finally, to regain some sense of herself.

The doctor was a tall, balding man with a high forehead. Suede had talked with him in a small, insecure way. He came in one day with a clipboard tucked under one arm, gave her a cursory looking over, told her it looked as if, despite her accident, she was going to be okay. Nothing wrong internally. Yes, yes, her insurance would cover it. No, no one else was injured. Apparently she had run off the road in the rain, coming back from work.

Yes, she would have to have physical therapy. Maybe she could be discharged as soon as she got up on her feet again, but he wanted to make sure. By the way, did she realize that, oddly enough her former place of employment was destroyed by fire? Hit by a lightening strike. Terrible tragedy. I take it fire safety regulations were not well known by the staff. Some loss of life.

It was some weeks before she was ready to get up and start walking again. The nurses were more than kind, helpful; her physical therapy was going well.

Every day she walked a little more, her hands grasping at the stainless steel rails as the physical therapist, June Albright, cooed over her, thrusting out knowledgeable hands occasionally.

It was lucky for Suede that her insurance held up; she had been banged-up pretty bad in the wreck. Her car had been crunched like a tin can, and she was informed that the “Jaws of Life” had been used to cut her from the car. She had been comatose for at least two weeks. At the outset, they hadn’t expected her to live.

“But I’m a tough bitch to kill”. she told June Albright. The older woman smiled in the same inscrutable manner as the rest of

the staff.

She was starting to enjoy the routine, she knew; it was nice to have no worries, no complaint, to be waited on hand and foot, for a change. She wondered about Cinder; no one had told her anything about another passenger being pulled from the wreck, and she had been too scared to broach the subject.

She looked in vain for a newspaper article concerning her, concerning the fire at Holloway House, concerning the car wreck. There was nothing, and she expressly asked her nurse, one evening, if they had any old papers that reported the accident, and what the police had said.

The nurse simply flashed the same inscrutable smile, and took the dinner tray away. Suede felt a little miffed, but waited to broach the subject again.

Time passed. A month; two months, and she still had no idea about what had happened to Cinder, or what she should do.

It was the change-over of the seasons; Winter was falling back to a retreat from the oncoming Spring, and the rushing warm front turned icy rain to misty fog. She spent a lot of time now limping around, looking out the window as cars passed below in the street.

April showers bring May flowers, she thought to herself, with a tinge of bitter humor. *Why am I starting to feel, a little, like I am a prisoner here?*

Perhaps it was the lack of any real conversation from anyone around her; the other patients, those that weren't specifically bedridden, looked as if they were shuffling through the days on a heavy cocktail of psycho affective mood stabilizers.

Thorazine.

Seroquel.

"Mind melters", she said to herself, laughing a little. "Everyone here is on mind melters, even the staff...and I'm next."

Visiting hours brought no visitors. Well, occasionally a very stilted, strangely artificial family would amble in to speak with

someone; maybe a new fish, or an old lady that did little more than sit alone and afraid; afraid of death, afraid of another long, tiring day of silence; afraid of the ticking of the clocks.

Suede spent her days idly flipping magazines, and feeling a deep, rumbling sense of worry grip her. Something was not right about this place. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but she knew, somehow that something had altered substantially since the long, dark time she had spent buried in the stillness of coma.

She had tried to call a friend, an ex-girlfriend, but all she got was a recording and her calls were never returned. She called her lawyer, too, but he was, apparently, on a long vacation in the Bahamas. She spent anxious little hours these days biting her nails.

But the food was good; the drugs, the pain-killers, were also very good. She felt a fog of forgetfulness slip over her more and more, and she realized she was losing herself, in the small hours, to a growing apathy in which she might, conceivably, sink for months.

Television.

Boring paperbacks.

Rec time.

Dinner.

Television.

Snack time.

Sleep.

She scanned the newspapers half-heartedly, but she saw nothing, nothing whatsoever, that related to her or the case of Cinder Rockwell. Her questions, fielded cautiously to the staff, were met with quiet reassurances, and faded, phony smiles. She knew only that she was a patient at Ballard Trauma Center; she wasn't even specifically, sure what city she was in, although she supposed she had been air-lifted to Louisville.

The days dragged on and on; the drugs began to pull an apathetic haze across her reasoning. Her hands shook uncontrollably, and her vision was often blurry and indistinct.

On the bright side, she was, slowly, getting the strength

back in her legs; her walking was better, and she could get around with the care of metal crutches that fitted around her forearms.

She had been moved, she supposed, to a recovery ward, but it seemed oddly more like a psychiatric clinic due to the odd assortment of characters that were inmates here. There were scraggly, incoherent men with no apparent injuries except whatever afflicted the delicate organism between their ears.

There were old women who sat endlessly rocking in their wheelchairs, mouthing babbles of God, and Beast, and Armageddon. There was even an occasional, rebellious teenager that seemed like they had been sent straight from some Hollywood casting office.

She had the displeasure of talking with one of them over graham crackers one night before “lights out”.

“S’what’s your name , man? My name is *Sssabrina*.”

The kid chewed her gum the way a cow chews it’s cud. She said her name with a sort of hissing, snake-like elongation, as if to say, “Wow, my name is really the best feature I have going for me.” Suede have her a quick once over, and decide that it indeed might be.

“I’m Suede. I was in an accident. A car accident. I think a friend of mine was killed, but I’m not sure.”

Instead of the usual sympathetic word that any normal person had the right to expect as a matter of decency, the strung-out little teenage girl exclaimed, “Far out! That is *so* totally gross. Uh, was their like blood and shit everywhere?”

The girl had filthy, stringy hair that had, obviously, been bleached more than it had ever been washed. Right now it hovered between being orange and off-red. Her eyeliner was thick, and her little, little tits pushed out the front of the gory, blood-dripping pentagram that adorned her heavy metal tee-shirt. What’s more, she had her leg kicked up on the table, as if to say “I’m more than comfortable with making this place my personal clubhouse to sit, idle away my time, and be lazy while I treat everyone around me like shit.” Her feet were dingy grey socks; her

jeans were a ratty, greasy mess.

Suede very curtly turned her mouth into a little “o”, and said, “No. I...I don’t remember anything about the accident. I, just barely, remember the last few weeks. If you don’t mind, I can’t really, talk about it...”

“Then why’d you bring it up?”

The kid looked like she had nothing better to do than hammer broken down women with annoying questions. At one time, Suede reflected, she would have brought this little stray home, tried to teach her to love, and had her feelings, eventually, smashed. No more.

Besides, no amount of love was going to correct what was wrong with this girl. Being a mental case was one thing; being an idiot was quite another.

Suede excused herself, got up and went to her room, barely hearing the young girl mutter something that sounded like, “Creepy bitch.”

She went into her room slowly, painfully, eased herself down into her bed. Her legs were much stronger, her body had healed up quite nicely, despit the accident. So: why was she still here?

The days had disappeared , she dimly realized, in a medicated fog, and it was as if she had been forgotten about as much as she forgot about herself. The staff always deflected even the simplest questions they perceived as being “probative”.

Every question was always somehow deflected; and then, of course, these meds made you just stop , really, giving a damn about much.

As she slipped between the cool, crisp sheets, she realized, for the first time, that she might possibly be a prisoner here. She wasn’t sure which way to turn with this train of thinking, but as she felt the pull of her medication take her down through dark fathoms of unconsciousness, she realized for the first time that perhaps she hadn’t survived any “car accident”, at all.

What had happened to her? Why was she here? And most

importantly: would they ever let her leave?

Her thoughts spun down into darkness, and dreams.

She was sitting in a warm, dim little café , and in front of her, sat two other people.

One was Cinder, or approximated Cinder in the way that dream-people do. She was dressed in a red dress, and she looked very beautiful then. Suede started to put out a hand to touch her, but found she could not move.

“Hello, Suede. I’ve missed you.”

Suede felt a lump grow in her throat. She leaned over, with difficulty, and said, “I’ve missed you too., baby. Where have you been? Can you tell me?”

Cinder looked sad for a moment, then smiled. She said: “Oh, I’ve been hanging around. I haven’t been able to find you. It’s so confusing here. It’s hard to know which way is up, sometime.”

Suddenly, beside them, appeared the form of a very old, very wizened man, wearing a black hat, a black suit, and having a white goatee. Also, the eyes were piercing grey flashes of steel.

Suede remembered him as Mr. Galls. But he looked like he had aged another twenty years or so since last she had seen him.

“Well, it looks like you kids have finally come together after all. You know, I like this place: anything’s possible here--for anybody. I could just snap my fingers, and--voila!”

And he did so, and suddenly, a tall, steaming mug of some liquid that smeled like raspberry sat before him. He picked up the mug, sipped, smacked his withered old lips, and said, “Mm, that’s good. Yeah, this place is great! You do have to be careful, though...”

He didn’t explain, but instead sat back in his chair. Suede suddenly realized that the color of his jacket had changed from black to a heavy scarlet. Also, he seemed to have lost a few years of age, as his face shifted subtly.

“There are Ones that are breaking through now, even as we

speak, and the situation is getting very dire. Even here, and this is--most often--a neutral zone, of sorts. But I know you don't really know what I'm talking about, so I'll just leave it at that."

He put his long withered fingers in front of him, and Suede noted how long his nails were. Also, they were painted black, and seemed to be slightly curved.

"I didn't bring you here for any trite lessons that the two of you, in your present forms, couldn't hope to understand anyway. No, I brought you here, because, if you'll forgive me, I don't like messy endings."

He leaned very close to Suede now, and she could feel his breath; it was as hot as fire, and smelled like cheap alcohol.

"I brought you here because I'm an old smoothy; a romantic, at heart. I believe all that we see, or seem, is but a dream within a dream. And if you can't share your dreams with someone you love, well, what would be the point in dreaming at all?"

He got up, slowly, and as he did, the table disappeared, and he receded into the shadows of the room, pausing only to snap his fingers again.

Suede found herself standing, facing Cinder. She reached out with one hand, and stroked back the lank, soft strands of hair that had fallen over one eye.

"We've reached the end of the beginning, haven't we?"

Suede didn't know what she meant, but she simply said, "yes. I've missed you. I hope you're alright."

And suddenly, she dragged her into her arms with a ferocious force, and kissed her madly, passionately. And then they danced. And music filled the cool blackness, and not even Galls was any palce to be seen.

This world was theirs, and theirs alone. This moment was all of them, and they'd defied the world and everything in it, she knew that, when she awoke from this dream of bliss, and longing heartfelt love, she would be sent back to that chilling room to look out on the greyness of a dawn that did not see the face of Cinder in quite the same way as she saw it, in her mind's eye.

Those that danced were thought insane, by those who couldn't hear the music, she thought. Where had she heard that before? No matter. She pulled Cinder to her again, and kissed her with every once of passion in her being.

And only a short time later the dream faded, and she opened her eyes, and silence reigned once more.

Epilog

If Cinder was alive somewhere, she would, undoubtedly, be dreaming of a day such as this.

Little Jimmie Lund hopped up in bed, turned, looked at the window at the beaming beauty of the day, dressed as quickly and sloppily as he could, put on his sneakers, grabbed his backpack, and pounded downstairs to breakfast.

Mom was in her usual gloomy mood, that morning, sitting at the kitchen table smoking a cigarette, pretending to be interested in the scant local paper.

“Hi buddy. There’s bacon and eggs.”

She barely looked up. He knew that she had been depressed lately; something about some boyfriend or other. He had failed to really elicit much of a response from her. But he was too young to be very aware of these things, and as he slowly munched his bacon and eggs, his mind began to summon up all the images of fun he sure he would be experiencing today. He was going to ride out to the fairgrounds on his bike, and, hopefully he would be able to find something there good enough to spend his allowance on.

“I’m going out to the fairground this afternoon, Momma. It’s okay, ain’t it?”

She nodded, made sure to tell him to be back well-before dark, and continued to puff on her cigarette. He noticed, as he munched away hungrily, that she bore dark worry lines on her forehead. She hadn’t slept well, he then realized.

“Don’t you get into any trouble out there young man, do you hear me? I don’t want to have to see you brought home in a Sheriff’s car, or something.” She said this without much feeling, her cigarette poised in the air, sending off appealing curls of smoke. A cloud suddenly shifted in the sky, bringing the kitchen into a brief interlude of early-morning gloom.

“I won’t get in any trouble momma. I promise. I just want to ride on some of the rides. Play some of the games. Freddie Walter said they have--oh--*whatchamacalit*, one of those things take you up real high, and drops you down again then lets you off...Momma, do you know what they call those things?”

She looked to him as if she would be happier back in bed. She forced a smile, said, “I wouldn’t know, buddy. I just know that I want my big strong man to be careful. It’s a mean world out there, pard. Believe me, you’ll find out one of these days...” She trailed off, yawned, scratched her messy head, got up, and started the breakfast dishes. He suddenly felt a little apprehensive.

He wanted to ask her, exactly, what she meant, but instead took a bowl from the cabinet, grabbed the milk from the fridge, found the box of cocoa Puffs, shook it, realized there was still enough for a satisfyingly delicious snack, and poured the contents in. Then he went to sit on the weathered grey rug in front of the television, flicking the buttons on the set until he happened upon a cartoon show that he especially liked.

She stood in the doorway of the kitchen, and looked at him, her heart a confusion of grief and love. His father had not, uh, *been around* for awhile. Bastard. She would make sure he kept on sending the support money on time. Or she would be swearing out a warrant on him.

Jimmie was as oblivious to his father’s monthly child support check as he was to the fact that his father hadn’t visited him in nearly six months. He only missed him sometimes, right before he fell asleep.

Wile E. Coyote fell over a cartoon cliff to what would have been, under normal circumstances, a certain, instantaneous death

It was maybe an hour later (still plenty of morning left) when he pulled on his shoes, put a copy of a favorite comic in his back pocket, made his bed, sort of, and ran out of his room, and out to the shed in the back to get his bicycle. The sun was beaming, and the world was getting hot. All up and down Kilickitat Street, people were stirring in the pleasure of a hot Saturday morning. He could hear televisions and radios begin to blare; lawnmowers hummed and buzzed. Old people did old people things and the mailman was circling about with his bag full of bills and his ridiculous gray shorts with the blue side stripes.

Jimmie pushed off onto the sidewalk and got going with the energy and anticipation of a young boy on the way to the fair. He had ten bucks in his pocket (a sum that seemed, to him at least, princely), and he could just taste the cotton candy and hotdog, and soda, and already smell that heavy musky odor of horseshit and frying food that he always associated with the coming of the Fair.

When he finally got to the fairground gates, he made sure to chain up his bike carefully. Already, the lot was about half-full of cars, and the midway was bustling between brightly-colored tents, booths laden with stuffed animals and flimsy junk, and a few interspersed rides farther down.

He paid a scandalously high-price for a clip-bracelet, and hurried his way through the crowds kicking up dust and tripping once or twice over a few inappropriately-placed cables.

He wanted to ride the electric swing, the small roller-coaster, the bumper cars...he would do all of this. But first he wanted to just walk around abit, and get a feel for the wonders of the day.

He settled on a corn dog and cola, moving in rhythm to the beauty of the merry-go-round music, and suddenly, just ahead, spied what he figured just might be his favorite ride in the entire world. The "Spook House".

He hurried forward, corn dog and soda clutched tightly in

opposite hands, and his eyes grew wide as he took in the garish painting that adorned the metal covering the outside of the ride.

It was like no other carnival art he had ever seen. It was, for the most part, executed with the same skill, and it was as terrifying as the ride itself promised to be. But instead of the stock images of Frankenstein, Dracula, and maybe a ghoul or two, the outside of the ride was decorated with an elaborate mural, depicting an alien race descending from a pitch-black sky that seemed to progress into the distance forever.

Beneath, bursting forth like morbid butterflies from the sepulchral cocoons of the tomb, ragged, deformed bodies pushed their way free from a bizarre, barren landscape that might have been the surface of Mars.

But the centerpiece of the artwork was a grand dragon, an Oriental nightmare of a twisting, reptilian body and strange, hooked claws. And seated upon the back of the floating dragon, a woman dressed in a wild, blood-red robe, whose eyes bore the look of complete, and utter monstrous evil, held in one hand a cup overflowing with (he presumed) blood, and in the other, she seemed to be holding a glowing sphere that lighted everything around her.

Jimmie had never seen anything so ornate in his life. He had never been to a museum, and his only experience with art was what he saw in cartoons and read in comic books. He knew immediately that he wanted to go on this particular ride and his pulse quickened.

He walked to the ticket-taker, a great burly man with a faded yellow shirt and huge arms covered in tattoos, and showed him his bracelet. The man, a great bald lout with bad teeth and horrible, perpetual ugly grin, nodded, and said, "We had to shut 'er down for a few minutes. But she should be ready to go soon, kid."

He leaned over, and undid the hooked latch of the heavy theatre rope in front of the ride. Jimmie ran up the wooden steps to the staging area, and waited for the cart to come out of the

garish, painted door --painted to look like a skull with glowing red eyes.

He was stopped, halfway up, by a character the likes of which he had never seen before. It was a tall--freakishly tall--man dressed in pin-stripe pants, a heavy, old-fashioned black coat that looked as if it once belonged to a mortician, and a tall, black stovepipe hat. His feet were shod in immense, old-fashioned boots, and the nails of his hands were long, painted black, and each nail seemed to have been filed to a razor tip.

But it was the eyes, set deeply into the cadaverous face, that seemed to bore into Jimmie's soul, and leave him standing at the bottom of those three, dusty wooden steps in a kind of idiotic mixture of fear and wonder. They seemed to shift, slightly, as you were looking at them, and he soon realized that it was quite impossible to pin down exactly what color they were. There was a kind of hideous, death-like pallor about the man; the sort of waxen ugliness that one usually associates with a freshly-embalmed corpse. And, as if that weren't enough, his tie-pin was shaped like a human skull.

"Well, howdy there, young man! Want to take a ride on the Nightmare Express?"

He held out one long, bony hand, and Jimmie took it, not at all liking the dray, cold, withered feel of it. He winced visibly, but continued up the wooden steps to the platform, and waited for the little car to come out the painted metal doors of the spook house, to his right.

"Yes, inside all are welcome, all are welcome! Into the land of nightmares and dreams. Where monsters and devils walk the earth! Come! Come! It'll be a ride like you never forget...Jimmie!"

Jimmie's head shot around, his heart suddenly stepping up a beat, as he saw the tall man had moved over to the ticket-takers booth, and grabbed an old-fashioned microphone that gave his voice a fuzzy, metallic edge. The ticket-taker, moved over to a box of switches at the side of the ride, and cranked a few, and deep within the bowels of the ride, the heavy rattle and whoosh of

gears and pistons began to whine, and the sound of the chain that dragged the car beneath the track clanged out like the rattle of old bones in a pine box.

The car (shaped like a plastic knock-off of an old fashioned sleigh, albeit with skeletal arms designs ringing the curling edges) cranked sullenly in front of him, and he slowly, somewhat nervously, all of a sudden, hopped in. He pulled the rusted protection-bar in front of him, and heard the rusty crunch as it clicked into place.

The tall man had been giving his spiel over the microphone, trying to drum up business, but all of a sudden he stopped, took his gaunt old mouth away from the microphone, pointed upward at Jimmie, and said, “ Now, mind you, boy, keep your arms in the ride--and, for goodness sake, DON’T TOUCH ANYTHING! It might take a fancy to your arm, and decide to keep it!”

“Mister,” Jimmie suddenly said, in a small voice which he suddenly realized was far too quiet to be heard. Then, he yelled, “Hey, Mister! How did you know my name was Jimmie? I never told--”

But suddenly he felt the gears grind, the carriage lurch forward, and the machinery of the ride roar into noisy life. The car moved slowly forward, and the tall man continued his carnival barker spiel over the loudspeaker.

Jimmie began to yell, and the carriage slammed into the aluminum doors in front with a monstrous clang, splitting them open as the carriage descended into the dark. Screams and howls were piped in, and the heavy, wild sound of pre-recorded organ music met his ears in the dark.

“He’s gonna get a real kick out of this one, huh boss?”

The fat, tattooed ticket-taker smiled. He was missing several of his front teeth.

The Overseer smile back, nodding appreciatively at his own, deft genius.

Jimmie disappeared beyond the barrier of the ride. Now he

Three

was inside the lurking darkness of the spook house. His fingers clutched the rusted bar in front of him tightly.

And then, *everything* changed.